

## Intersubjectivity in “Where I’m Calling From”

—— Possible Worlds Approach

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**Abstract:** Carver study is comprehensive and diversified. But criticisms on his later work “Where I’m Calling From” are not abundant. Most critics center their studies on the alcoholism topic of the story. As for the meaning-making and development of plot, no one pays much attention to. Intersubjectivity theory concerns the relationship between self, others, society, nature, world and man and is usually used to conceptualize the psychological relation between people. Possible worlds theory allows us to examine the episode’s interplay and the construction of fictional worlds. Based on the semiotic recognition, these two theories are brought together. Employing the principles of intersubjectivity theory and the analytical mode of possible worlds theory, taking “Where I’m calling From” as an analytical datum, this paper attempts to explore 1) the possible worlds in which the characters inhabit and behave; 2) the intersujective relations between characters and their ways relating to the world; 3) the development of the plot in the conflicts between alternate possible worlds; 4) the meaning conveyed in the development and their role on the theme revelation. By analyzing the possible worlds in the story and the intersubjectivity information contained, how Carver creates a meaningful fictional world in the apparent emptiness is detected and the profound meaning is interpreted in a brand new way.

### 1. Introduction

As a representative short story writer, Raymond Carver has been widely studied and controversially commented. Critics favoring his style hail him as the “greatest short story writer since Hemingway”, the “godfather” of literary minimalism and the model for a “burgeoning school of workshop story writers” (e.g. Robert Stone, Robert Coover). Critics disliking his style condemn him as a dangerous trendsetter (e.g. Madison Bell). His monotone, his sparse verbal textures, his impoverished language and verbal anorexia, which are advantages in admirers’ eyes, all become the targets of their decrying (Nesset 1995: 29). “Where I’m Calling From” under scrutiny is one of Carver’s representative stories in his mature creation period. Set in a drying-out facility, the story develops around two alcoholics — J.P. and “I”. J.P. talks about his past. “I” listen. J.P.’s wife comes to visit him. “I” keep alone. In every sense, the story is typically Carver’s — flat narrative tone, extreme sparseness of story, an obsession with the drab and quotidian, a general avoidance of extensive rumination (Saltzman 1988: 4). Then how does Carver create a meaningful fictional world in the apparent emptiness? What kind of worlds does he create? What information is shown in building these worlds?

Intersubjectivity theory concerns the relationship between self, others, society, nature, world and man, and is usually used to conceptualize the psychological relation between people. Possible worlds theory is a theory that allows us to examine the episode’s interplay between history and fiction in a way that illuminates how fictional worlds are constructed (Norris 2007). Taking “Where I’m calling From” as analytical data, the author attempts to apply possible worlds theory to explore the worlds in which the characters inhabit and behave. At the same time, intersubjectivity theory will be used to account for the communicative relations between characters and their ways relating to the world as a whole.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Model

### 2.1 Carver Research and Criticism on “Where I’m Calling From”

In the United States, no minimalist writer has been favored by different criticism schools like Carver. According to the references listed by MLA Bibliography, there are 6 academic books and more than 280 research articles about Carver. And there is still an upward trend in his research.

Overall, Carver research is splendid. The social and economic environment presented in his works has attracted the attention of many critics and has become a research hotspot. Morris Dickstein believes that Carver is sympathetic with and good at describing the poor or underprivileged groups in the United States, and is a true social realist; Frank Lentricchia thinks that Carver is a dangerous social realist with a conservative political agenda; John Aldridge believes that he is a failed socialist with no political agenda and no understanding of his social matrix. The epistemological meaning in his work is another hot topic. William Gass calls him a naïve naturalist wearing a minimalist mask; Tom Wolfe considers him a epistemological nihilist wearing a realist mask; Phillip Simmons regards him as a true postmodernist skeptic. There are also many researchers who focus on the aesthetic function and formal innovation of his work. They assign Carver to the “minimalist” school. John Barth reads him as a founder of the highly original and representational minimalist style; Joshua Gilder despises Carver’s work and reads him as a copier of an insipid Hemingwayesque tone. James Atlas thinks that he is a stylistically blank chronicler of urban despair (Leypoldt 2001).

In addition to macro reviews, the internal and external worlds of Carver’s works have also been studied intensively and meticulously. Carver’s Spartan style is one of the commentary focuses.. Some critics compare his work to Hemingway’s work (such as Arthur Bethea); some study the charm of the style itself (such as Daniel Just, Charles May); some put it in a televisual cultural background (such as Bill Mullen). The existential bafflement of Carver’s characters and their ways of dealing with it are no doubt another analytical focus (such as Gareth Cornwell). Other critics have focused on the connection between his personal experience, contents of his stories and changes of his style (such as Laurie Champion, Chad Wriglesworth). Perhaps the most significant article concerning Carver’s spirituality is William Stull’s “Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver.” In this essay Stull contrasts the darkness of Carver’s earlier work with the optimism illustrated in *Cathedral* (Wriglesworth 2004). Compared with the comprehensive and diversified Carver criticism in Western countries, studies in China has not been so prosperous. Tang Weisheng elaborated on the ending of Carver’s short stories in his doctoral dissertation; Xu Jin, Li Xianqiong, Shen Hui and Wu Yang respectively studied the aesthetics of minimalism, the themes, the thematic shift, and woman characters of Carver’s stories in their master theses. There also appeared some academic articles. Li Gongzhao discussed Carver’s minimalist style; Tang Weisheng & Li Jun, Wang Zhongqiang, Huang Lili analyzed Carver’s narrative features and its development; Qiu Xiaoqing, Shen Jingyu studied Carver’s use symbols; Zhou Jingqiong, Luo Siling compared the works of Carver and Kafka.

“Where I’m Calling From” is one of Carver’s favorite stories. In order to improve it, Carver spared no effort in revising it. The original story appeared in the *New Yorker* (March 15, 1982); then Carver significantly revised it and included it in his highly praised *Cathedral*; later on, with a few slight revisions, the story was reprinted in *Where I’m Calling From*. But a work liked so much by Carver has not gained deserving critical attention. In searching the literature, we can find only sporadic comments on it. This is one of the most important reasons for the author to explore this work. It is a story revolving around a few alcoholics. Most of the available literature is, more or less, related to this alcoholism topic. Magee (2000) takes the story as an alcohol addiction, recovery, and possible redemption. Cochrane (1989) thinks that the story shows the spiritual ills of alcoholism and the spiritual rebirth of the recovery process. Donahue (1991) argues for the essential function of the alcoholics’ conversation in the story, because it “disrupts the ideology of alcoholism by preventing the characters from becoming verbally isolated”. Nessel (1994) suggests that the narrator experiences a “positive and necessary” confinement that prompts the “coming out of hardened

insularity that involves intensive listening". Malamet (1991) notes the narrator's reluctance to share his own experiences and demonstrates ways that provide textual coherence and signify the narrator's self-identity. Verley (1989) examines patterns of imagery and plot structure of the story. Haslam (1992) compares and comments on the three versions of the novel from the textual point of view. In China, only Wang Zhongqiang and Huang Zhongshan have conducted a concentrated discussion on this story. The former discusses the alcoholic addiction and salvation, the latter studies the tone and color. So there is still much room to excavate.

## 2.2 Intersubjectivity

The concept of intersubjectivity was first put forward in the field of philosophy as the complement and development of subjectivity. The definition of Lacey in *A Dictionary of Philosophy* shows this relationship clearly: "Something is intersubjective if there are ways of reaching agreement about it, even though it may not be independent of the human mind (and hence not objective) ... Intersubjectivity is usually contrasted with subjectivity rather than with objectivity, which it may include" (Lacey 1996: 163-164). With bringing into reasonable factors of phenomenology, hermeneutics and even the latter modernism literary criticism, it has, now, become a popularly used term in the field of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, is among the first to illustrate intersubjectivity. He wants to use the new theory to help transcendental phenomenology shake off the crisis of solipsism or self-theory. According to Husserl, intersubjective experience is empathic experience, plays a fundamental role in our constitution of both ourselves as objectively existing subjects, other experiencing subjects, and the objective spatio-temporal world. Putting it simply, Husserl's intersubjectivity refers to the relationship between subjects from the epistemological perspective and it touches upon the universality of knowledge.

Heidegger's intersubjectivity is the modification and "existentialist" adaptation of Husserl's. His theory relied much on an "ontologically and existentially construed self" (Dallmayr 1980). Heidegger thinks that "Authentic selfhood does not exist in an exceptional condition of subjectivity detached from 'the They'; rather it is an existential modification of 'the They' considered as a basic existential structure" (Heidegger 1962: 68). The nature of human beings lies in the openness of being, which is the middle field where the relations of subjects can be presented. In another word, co-being is the prescription of being. From Heidegger on, intesubjectivity began to have the ontological meaning.

Buber, in discussing intersubjectivity, takes "I-Thou" as the stating point, rather than the traditional "self". In Buber's eyes, I-Thou occurs in the face-to-face situation in which the being of the self with the other is realized. It is critically important that this realization lacks conceptualization, has no objective content and the I-thou relationship occurs in the flow of time (Grinnell 1983). The mode of intersubjectivity is set up on the basis of intersubjective relationship for the first time.

Gadamer explores intersubjectivity from the hermeneutic point of view. In his theory, the world is a frame in which we exist through language and communication. Conversation becomes the locus of intersubjectivity and dialogue holds a distinctive place in the formation of the subject (Vessey 2005). In the process of interpretation, intersubjectivity presents as the blending of views. Habermas uses intersubjectivity as a central term in two intellectual projects: the critique of positivism and scientism, and the reappropriation of the hermeneutic tradition (Grady & Wells 1985). For him, the sphere of intersubjectivity has an autonomous existence. It is a medium of communicable knowledge that must be created and maintained through the interaction of many subjectivities. Just as Habermas claimed, "the actor takes the perspective toward himself of another participant in interaction and becomes viable to himself as a social object only when he adopts as his own the objective meaning of his vocal gestures, which stimulates both sides equally" (Habermas 1992: 177). Halliday expounds intersubjectivity from the perspective of social semiotics. In his theory, man is social man; coexistence is the intrinsical relationship between subjects. Language is the means of doing things and is the collection of all meaningful activities. Language behaviors, on the

one hand, determine the relation of man and social milieu, and on the other hand, reflect the relations between subjects (Halliday 1971). Up to now, intersubjectivity theory has shown a clear anthropological mark.

Tracing the development of intersubjectivity, it is not difficult to find that in the process of absorbing nutrients from phenomenology, hermeneutics, anthropology, linguistics and other domains, intersubjectivity theory has become more powerful and more applicable in interpreting things and solving problems.

### 2.3 Possible Worlds Theory

Possible worlds theory was originally developed by philosophers and logicians to tackle issues of ontology and formal semantics. It was subsequently developed by narratologists and semioticians to account for the problem of fictionality: what is the ontological status of nonexistent fictional objects and what is the logical status of fictional representations (Doležel 1989: 221). Prince gives an explanation of “possible worlds” in his *Dictionary of Narratology*: “Narratives comprise temporally ordered sequences of states of affairs that are taken to be actual/factual (‘what happens’) and that are linked to other states of affairs considered non-actual or counterfactual and constituted by the mental activity of various characters (their beliefs, wishes, plans, hallucinations, fantasies, etc.)” (Prince 2003: 77).

Among a range of possible worlds theories in literature (Lewis 1978; Pavel 1986; Doležel 1989; Ryan 1991b, etc.), Ryan’s model is more convincing and practical. It offers two sets of extremely useful conceptual tools. The first consists of a list of criteria that define the way readers in an actual world are able to achieve mental access to fictional worlds. Ryan calls these criteria accessibility relations (Ryan 1991: 32-33). The second set of conceptual tools can be found in Ryan’s categorization of virtual domains within fiction as private or possible (nonfactual) worlds that she calls “knowledge-worlds”, “obligation-worlds”, and “wish-worlds”, “fantasy-worlds”. According to Ryan, the semantic domain of fictional works comprises a sum of worlds that is centered around its own actual world which she calls the textual actual world. The whole fiction is a modal system that consists of both factual events of text actual world and the private worlds of characters such as wish worlds, obligation worlds, etc. The text actual world is an actual world “made up of what exists absolutely in the semantic universe of the text”, the private worlds “exists in the minds of characters” (Ryan 1991: 112). Fictional narrative is a dynamic system. It changes from state to state as the plot starts. Once plot is initiated, there must be “some sort of conflict in the textual universe”. Ryan establishes a typology of narrative conflicts: (i) conflicts between the text actual world and private worlds; (ii) conflicts within a character’s domain; (iii) conflicts within a private world; (iv) conflicts between the private worlds of different characters (Ryan 1991: 120-123). Ryan’s typology of conflict in fictional world contributes much to the dynamics of plot and characters.

Possible worlds theory, with its grounding in analytic philosophy and philosophy of logic, offers readers and critics strategies for clarifying with greater rigor and precision interpretive assumptions that are generally made intuitively (Norris, 2007). Possible worlds approach is particularly useful in describing the internal structure of the textual universe, and in accounting for the development of the plot. This results form seeing the textual universe as a dynamic combination of a textual world on the one hand, and different types of alternate possible worlds formulated by characters on the other (Semino 2003: 86-87). The following analysis is mainly based on the modal set by Ryan. And for analytical convenience and clarity, some terms are borrowed from text world theory. For instance, World builders (WB) refer to the elements defining the background, such as time (t), location (l), characters (c) and objects (o); function-advancers (FA) refer to the elements constituting actions, events, states and processes (Stockwell 2002: 137).

## 3. Intersubjectivity Analysis of “Where I’m Calling From”

### 3.1 Intersubjectivity Interpretation of the Possible Worlds

“Where I’m Calling From” under analysis is the third version appearing in Carver’s newest

collection *Where I'm Calling From*. The story takes a first-person narrator. As a listener, he leads us into J.P.'s world; as a spectator, he leads us into the world of Tiny and another unnamed character; as an experiencer, he leads us into his world. In the continual shifting of worlds between character's ideal and reality, between their reminiscence and expectation, the narrator successfully presents a universe of alcoholics.

The story happens in Frank Martin's drying-out facility. J.P. and "I" are two alcoholics who are carrying on drying out. The first paragraph begins with the brief introduction to J.P. and "I":

He is **telling** me how he decided to go into his line of work, and he wants to **use** his hands when he talks. But his hands **tremble**. I mean they won't keep still. "This has never happened to me before," he **says**. He means the trembling. I **tell** him I **sympathize**. I tell him the shake will idle down. And they will. But it takes time.  
(Carver 1988: 208)

The narrator uses very simple words to tell the readers "who" does "what" in "what time" and "where". In the interaction of two characters, a mutual text actual world of them forms. Just as shown in Figure 1, in this text actual world, there are several small worlds embedded and, at the same time, a new fantasy world is triggered by it.

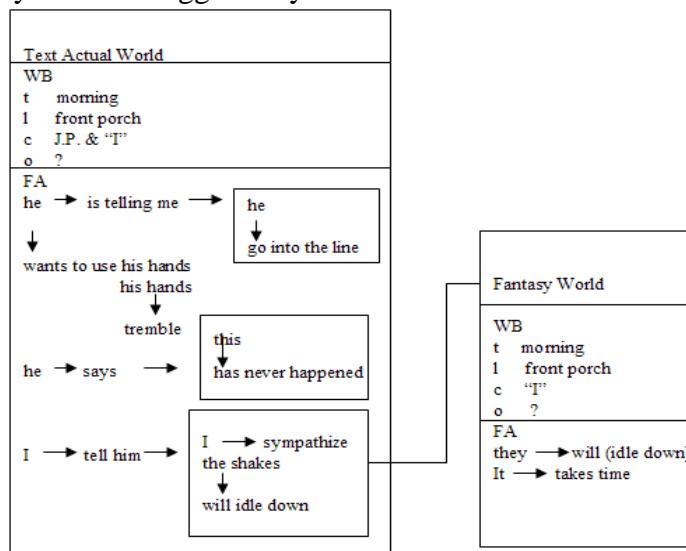


Figure 1 A Mutual Text Actual World of J. P. and "I"

J.P. is the story-teller, "I" am the listener in this mutual world. But as alcoholics, it is very difficult for us to concentrate on the communication. The topic is how J.P. chose to be a chimney sweep, but there is nothing substantial about it. This speech domain is briefly shown in an indirect speech. Ryan argues that a conflict between some of the worlds that make up a textual universe is necessary to get a plot started. (Ryan, 1991:120) Now a conflict appears between J.P.'s intention world and his text actual world. The stimulus is "his hands". The "trembling" distracts J.P.'s attention from his topic. He begins to comment on the trembling. Out of politeness, "I" follow suit and express "my" sympathy and encouragement. While doing this, "I" drop into "my" fantasy world.

The quick shifting and blending of different worlds of characters, on the one hand, shows their unsteady mental state. Under the influence of alcoholism, to control their body and mind becomes a challenge. The barriers of their understanding and communicating can be seen from some other sentences scattering in the first paragraph, such as "What's to say? I'm back.", "I mean, they won't keep still.", "He means the trembling." On the other hand, the conflicts between the alternate possible worlds disclose a kind of inharmonious intersubjective relationship. J.P.'s body out of the control of his mind unfurls a disaccord between self. "My" indolence in dialogue indicates that this is not a well-matched exchange. "I" am only a listener of J.P.'s story. Considering together with the writing background, the quick cut of worlds, the minimalist dialogue and plainest expression, is also a reflection of "the fragmentary and alienated condition of the twentieth-century itself" (Facknitz

1990: 62).

At the beginning of the second paragraph, the fantasy world continues — but changes from J.P.'s trembling to my "nerve". "I" am not very sure about whether it is a nerve or not, but "I" sense its existence every so often. Sometimes it begins to "jerk in my shoulder", sometimes it is "at the side of my neck". When it happens, "my mouth dries up". The following passage is the continuation and extension of the fantasy world:

I know something's about to happen and I want to head it off. I want to hide from it, that's what I want to do. Just close my eyes and let it pass by, let it take the next man. (Carver 1988: 208)

There appear altogether two coordinating worlds: one is a knowledge world, another is a wish world (see Figure 2). Knowledge world is what the characters in the fictional world believe to be true about their world (Stockwell 2002: 94). Judging from the symptoms, "I" get an impression that there is something wrong with "my" body, no matter it is a nerve or not. J.P.'s shake strengthens this impression directly. So it is very natural for "me" to believe that "something's about to happen".

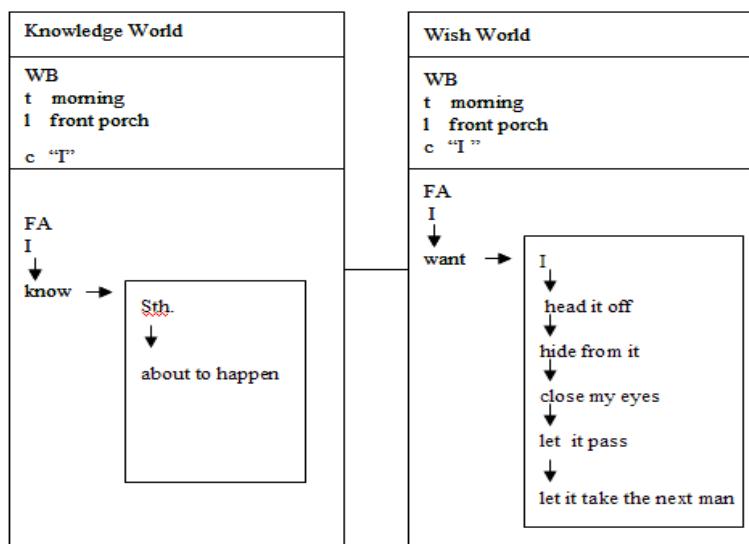


Figure 2 Knowledge World and Wish World of "I"

As this knowledge world is established, a wish world is built at the same time. Wish world is what characters wish or imagine might be different about their world (Stockwell 2002: 95). "I" suffer from the attack of nerve or something like that. "I" am scared by the possible disaster it may bring. "I" have the strong desire to get rid of it, to escape from it, or simply to pass it to some other person. The last wish seems a little bit shabby, but it reveals the authentic thought of a person in pain. In these two relatively simple possible worlds, there also conveys some information about intersubjectivity. First, these two worlds shape as "I" listen to J.P.'s story. The distraction is vitally obvious. So the loose communication relationship between J.P. and "I" is consolidated once again. Second, "my" body is not in a good condition, which becomes the source of "my" mental torment. This is a hostile relationship between body and mind. Third, if possible, "I" hope to find a scapegoat who can suffer from the pain in place of me. Unintentionally, "I" and the possible "other" form a relationship of substitution.

When "I" am wandering in "my" knowledge world and wish world. A scene of a seizure bursts into "my" mind. From the third paragraph on, the narrator recounts the story of Tiny. Tiny is another character afflicted with alcoholism. He is recovering and will be back to the normal life soon. But a sudden seizure falls on him. We synthesize the information about Tiny and draw the following figure (Figure 3).

According to Ryan, the creation of complex networks of unrealized possibilities is central to the aesthetic potential or "tellability" of plots. That is to say, the aesthetic value of plots crucially depends on the way in which the characters' alternate possible worlds from "private embedded

narratives” that enter in complex relationships with each other (Ryan 1991: 156). Tiny is on the way of recovery, he is reasonable enough to look forward to going home and plan to spend a comfortable New Year with his family. This forms his wish word and intention world. With these beautiful ideas in mind, Tiny looks very cheerful when he comes for breakfast. His high mood can be seen easily, “he was letting out with quacking noises”, he “edged in … and began telling something that happened on one of his drinking bouts”, he “would say something, grin, then look around the table for a sign of recognition” (Carver 1988: 208-209). When he is immersing in the dreamy happiness, a seizure visits unexpectedly. Suddenly he drops from his chair and falls on the ground. He loses his consciousness. This is the text actual world of Tiny.

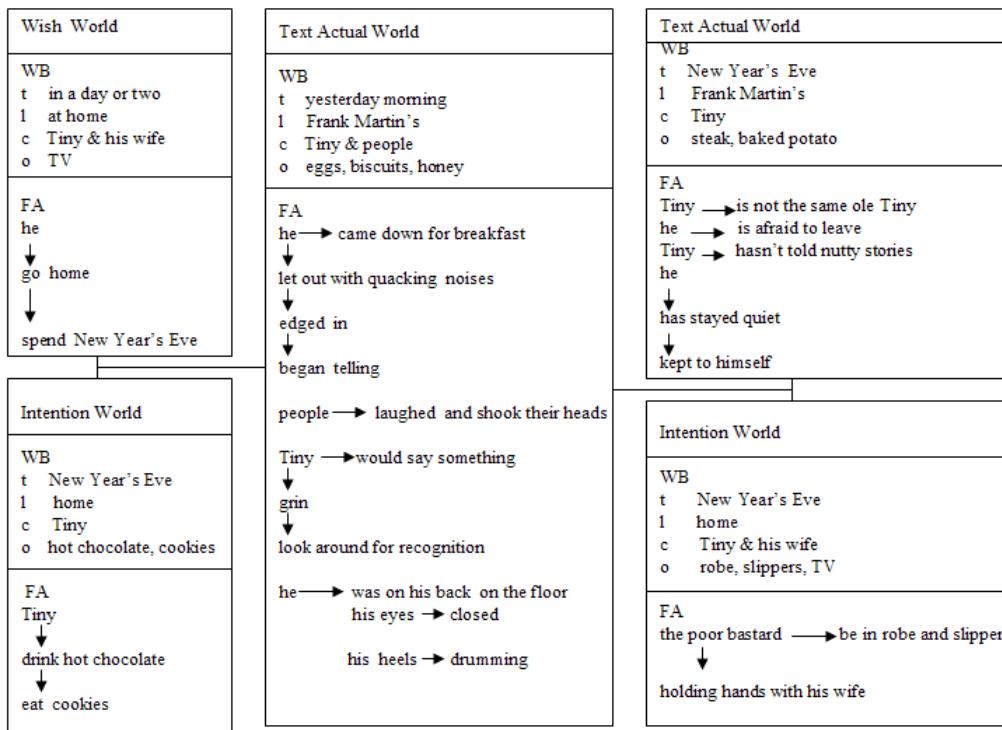


Figure 3 Wish World, Intention World and Text Actual World of Tiny

When he comes back from the hospital, everything changes, which forms a different text actual world:

Tiny is not the same old Tiny. The poor bastard **had planned** to be at home tonight. He **had planned** to be in his robe and slippers in front of the TV, holding hands with his wife. Now he's **afraid to leave**. [...] Tiny **hasn't told** any more nutty stories on himself since it happened. He's **stayed quiet** and **kept to himself**. (Carver 1988:217)

After the attack of the seizure, garrulous Tiny sinks into reticence. His appetite loses in the meanwhile. He does not dare to anticipate leaving Frank Martin's and spending the New Year with his wife, because “one seizure means you're ready for another”. In such a circumstance, his former plan seems unprecedently ironical. As far as he's concerned, happiness only means “in robe and slippers”, “in front of TV”, “holding hands with his wife”. These common comforts which every normal man can enjoy in his daily life suddenly become things far beyond reach. Tiny's hope for a normal life is shattered by the cruel bout all of a sudden. The incompatible intersubjective relationship between body and mind, reality and ideal is intensified again. At the same time, a pessimistic tone is produced.

Tiny's experience transmits a sort of inauspicious information to the people in Frank Martin's. “I” am the one who is particularly shocked. “I'd like to ask him if he had any signal just before it happened. I'd like to know if he felt his ticker skip a beat, or else begin to race. Did his eyelid twitch?”(Carver 1988: 209) Why “I” care so much about the signal? The reason is very obvious. “I” have some symptoms and am afraid that “I” would be the next to be attacked. Although very

curious, “I” still choose to keep inarticulate, “I’m not about to say anything”. “I” am not a sociable person, but “I” refuse to admit that. The reason for “my” silence is boiled down to that “He doesn’t look like he’s hot to talk about it, anyway.” Communication is an efficient way to open hearts. “Our” reluctance to communicate makes our estranged situation worse.

In the next part, the narrator returns to J.P.’s story. One thing desires our special attention is that J.P. fell into a well when he was twelve years old. This episode forms the text actual world of little J.P., but it still influences J.P. now. He experiences the similar situation in the present text actual world: out of work, out of love, out of touch. He is in despair; he needs a “rope” to save him:

He’d suffered all kinds of terror in that well, hollering for help, waiting, and then hollering some more. He hollered himself hoarse before it was over. But he told me that being at the bottom of that well had made a lasting impression. He’d sat there and looked up at the well mouth. Way up at the top, he could see a circle of blue sky. Every once in a while a white cloud passed over. A flock of birds flew across [...] He heard other things. He heard tiny rustling above him in the well, which made him wonder if things might fall down into his hair. He was thinking of insects. (Carver 1988:210)

J.P.’s experience of falling into the well serves a vivid description of the drinkers’ mood and fate. The waiting in the solitude of temperance is comparable to the situation on the bottom of the well. It is hard to predict what will happen: will the temperance succeed or fail? Will there be salvation or destruction? The outside world is like the white clouds or the flocks of flying birds above the well. There are hopes to fly into the sky, hopes to recover from alcoholism. However their hope of climbing out of the well needs others’ help, especially their family member’s concern. They are too fragile to be hurt or deserted. Just like J.P. in the well, the things above the well may drop and kill him. Putting it another way, the “well” has become an important symbol. For the narrator and J.P. alike, the well represents the pitfalls of experience, the dark places they have found themselves in, places they are extricated from ultimately only through the intervening efforts of others (Nesset 1995: 60).

Comiseration instigates recuperation. J.P.’s honest and accurate naming of his own weaknesses and self-destructive foundering draws “me” like a loadstone, and at the same time, initiates the continuation of the “my” story. In a sense, J.P. gives “me” courage to recollect “my” relationship with “my” wife and “my” girlfriend.

I guess she got home okay. I think I would have heard something if she didn’t. But she hasn’t called me, and I haven’t called her. Maybe she’s had some news about herself by now. Then again, maybe she hasn’t heard anything. Maybe it was all a mistake. Maybe it was somebody else’s smear. But she has my car, and I have things at her house. I know we’ll be seeing each other again. (Carver 1988:216-217)

This is an episode after “my” girlfriend sent me here to dry out. From the narrator’s reminiscence, we can easily find that “my” girlfriend and “I” are in an awkward relation from the beginning. “We” are together not out of love, but are linked by something unclear. “She didn’t have any idea what she was letting herself in for when she said I could stay with her after my wife asked me to leave” (Carver 1988: 216). What we do when we are together is only drinking and getting drunk. Drinking becomes a pattern of life. When we get the news that she maybe catches a cancer, we get ourselves “good and drunk”. When she drives to send me to Frank Martin’s, we drink champagne all the way. We try to “make a little party of it”. Now let’s take a look at this passage from possible worlds point of view.

As shown in Figure 4, words like “guess” and “think”, at the beginning of this passage, help form a prospective extension of knowledge world. Briefly speaking, prospective extensions refer to things the characters anticipate about their world, or other hypotheses they hold (Stockwell, 2002: 94). “I” am not courageous enough to face the possibly bad situation of “my” girlfriend, all “I” can do is speculate. “I” guess she safely drove home, because no news is good news. “I” guess she has got a definite diagnosis. And “I” even guess the possible cancer is only a false alarm. Mixed with

these speculative extensions are two text actual worlds and a knowledge world. If we take the prospective extensions as a kind of solicitude and care, what is shown in the text actual worlds is cruelty and indifference. The first truth is that “she hasn’t called me, and I haven’t called her.” The second truth is that “she has my car, and I have things in her house.” Considered from intersubjectivity viewpoint, “my” girlfriend and “I” keep an alienated relationship: when “we” are together, “we” are pot companions; when “we” are separated, “we” are two selves. Safety and health is no superior to the material things. But taken in another way, “we” are not cold-blooded persons. “We” are drinking only to intoxicate “ourselves”. Escapism has solidified as a principle of “our” action, because “to protest is to waste one’s breath; to fight is to waste one’s energies, ‘better to say nothing and do even less’” (Hallett 1999: 25).

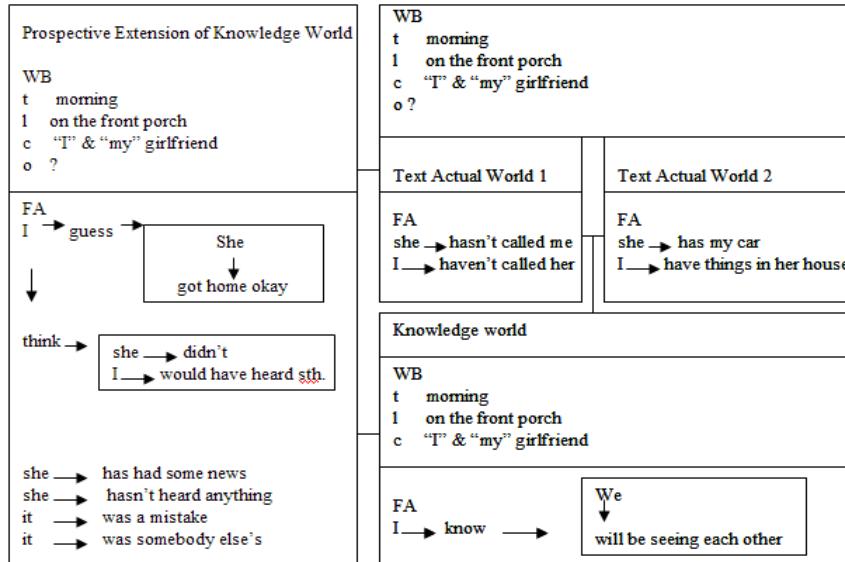


Figure 4. Prospective Extensions, Knowledge World and Text Actual World of “I”

In the New Year’s morning, J.P.’s wife comes to visit him, which triggers “my” remembrance of the happy family life “I” once had. “My” eagerness to return to the normal life becomes stronger than ever before. “I” long for care and communication. So “I” telephone to “my” wife, but nobody answers; “I” think about calling “my” girlfriend, but “I” don’t want to talk to her. “I” seem to be deserted. But hope still exists, for “my” girlfriend, “I have things at her house”; for “my” wife, “Something had to be done about my stuff. I still had things at her house, too.” (Carver 1988:217).

I’ll try my wife first. If she **answers**, I’ll **wish** her a Happy New Year. But that’s it. I won’t **bring up** business. I won’t **raise** my voice. Not even if she starts something. She’ll **ask** me where I’m calling from, and I’ll have to **tell** her. I won’t **say** anything about New Year’s resolutions. There’s no way to make a joke out of this. After I talk to her, I’ll **call** my girlfriend. Maybe I’ll call her first. I’ll just have to hope I don’t get her kid on the line. “Hello, sugar,” I’ll **say** when she answers. “**It’s me.**”(Carver 1988:221)

After two times failure of calling, “I” still want to have another try. Just like J.P. hollering at the bottom of the well, “I” am making efforts to search for “my” salvation. A slight concern of “my” wife or “my” girlfriend may firm “my” resolution to fight against alcoholism and haul “me” back to the normal life. Telephone defines “my” fate, it deserves another try. The narrator takes the matter so seriously that he repeatedly rehearses it in his mind. In the following figure, the psychological movement of the narrator is clearly revealed.

With deciding who he will call first and what he will say, his fantasy world unfolds in the form of inner dialogues. In his presupposition, his wife is the first person he’d like to talk with. The choice itself means that in his heart he still cherishes the happiness they once had and wants to come back to the normal family life. This can also be seen from his memory about that “house-painting” morning — a cozy room, a high-spirited wife, an idle life. But the last time quarrel is still a nightmare, he doesn’t want to repeat the old story. He decides to make everything

under control this time: no business, no high voice, no New Year's resolutions, only a Happy New Year. As for his whereabouts, only when it is inquired, he will say. His caution in choosing voice and topics shows clearly his seriousness in the matter. Comparatively, the calling to his girlfriend seems less complex: only a hello and an assertion of identity.

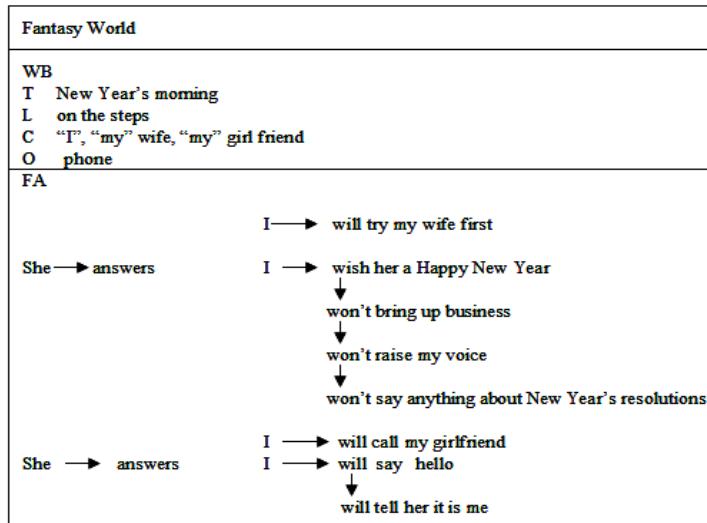


Figure 5 Fantasy World of "I"

In the constant struggle, the narrator begins to build up a harmonious intersubjective relationship between self and others. When was sent to the temperance centre for the first time, he was dubious of returning to a normal life and hesitant to take action, "Part of me wanted help. But there was another part" (Carver 1988: 215). Encouraged by J.P.'s reunion with his wife, the positive self begins to gain the upper hand. The gesture of calling his wife and girlfriend signifies his determination to climb out of the well made of alcohol. "It's me" might seem an inconclusive note on which to end the story, but "this simple declaration suggests hard-earned self-knowledge and self-acceptance, the foundation on which the structure of a new life may be erected" (Cochrane 1989).

### 3.2 Intersubjectivity Interpretation of Quintessential Matters

Carver based his writing on three minimalist principles: accuracy of expression is a moral act; there are consequences in sudden awakenings; there is no place in writing for tricks (Campbell 1992: 91). So, it is no surprise to find that things in his fiction are more than they appear to be. Commonplace objects often become transformed to powerful, emotionally charged signifiers. Even the most ordinary gestures and exchanges have transformed meanings. In the following part, we will use intersubjectivity theory as a tool to interpret the meanings of a few seemingly trivial matters in the story.

The first that comes into our discussion is "the porch" where the story between J.P. and "I" takes place. "The (front) porch" appears altogether five times in the story and forms a specific background and a crucial clue. A porch is a structure attached to the exterior of a building often forming a covered entrance. This half protected and half exposed place echoes to the situation of the alcoholics in Frank Martin's, especially, J.P and "I". If they stay in the temperance centre, they may be cured and get a chance to get their lives back on track; if they go to the outside world, they may be exposed to the social chillness and go to destruction at last. Taken from the intersubjectivity point of view, "the porch" symbolizes the liminal space existing between the internal security of the cure-in-process and the lure and danger of the outer world (Nesset, 1995: 57). If the alcoholics want to live harmoniously with themselves and the others, there is only one way to choose, that is, to overcome alcoholism and to face the things they have to face.

The second that deserves our attention is the story "To Build a Fire". The narrator remembers the story when calling his wife failed twice and no message has been heard from his girlfriend. He is freezing in psychology, just like the guy is freezing in body. He needs the concern of his wife or his girlfriend to warm his heart up, just like the guy needs a fire to warm his body up. Unfortunately,

the guy's fire is extinguished by a branchful of snow, but the narrator's hope still flickers vaguely. He hopes that either of them answers the call. Their answer is the rope to pull him out of the well, is the fire to save him from the coldness of world. He decides to try again. This narrator makes his uttermost effort, but the result is still a question. The story ends here and leaves reader in suspense. This "building fire" metaphor conveys the information that the narrator struggles painfully to gain an intersubjective harmony.

The third in the list of our discussion is J.P.'s story and Roxy's kiss. In Carver's world, liberation necessarily involves the influence or guidance of a fellow being. This fellow enters the world unexpectedly and affords a new perspective or an awareness to lead himself or another person away from the confining strictures of self (Nesset 1995: 52). J.P.'s story plays such a role on the change of the narrator and J.P. himself. At the beginning, the narrator is only a passive listener. He shows great interest in J.P.'s story and urges him to continue each time he stops. But he hardly mentions his own story. He gets relief and escape in listening tales, "It's helping me relax, for one thing. It's taking me away from my own situation" (Carver 1988: 213). As Cochrane points out, by listening to J.P.'s story and observing his behavior, the narrator begins, consciously or unconsciously, to look for a new perspective from which he can see his own experience.

Recounting his past also enables J.P. to perceive the pain he has inflicted on his family and reinforces his determination to regain the past happy life back. The several times of silence during the narration can be taken as his meditation on and remorse for his past life. In the process of self-anatomy, he gets salvation in soul. When his wife comes to visit him and suggests going to town for lunch, he declines by saying that "It hasn't been a week yet" and "I think they'd like it if I didn't leave the place for a little while yet" (Carver 1988: 219). The sense this response produces is that J.P. starts to value the life with his wife and is determined to free himself from drinking. There is still another factor that urges the change of the narrator, that is, Roxy's kiss. Roxy's kiss has a magical power. It decided the profession and life of J.P. at the first meeting. The narrator has a blind faith in Roxy's kiss. The behavior of asking for a kiss from Roxy indicates his desire for recognition. Roxy kisses him generously and says "Good Luck". Roxy's sincerity and her reunion with J.P. help the narrator make up his mind to break away from drinking. In this sense, Roxy's kiss is a turning point for the narrator to acknowledge his condition and be willing to change it. The story closes with the narrator's intention to call his wife and his girlfriend, implying that he is ready to face the hard choices. Now, for the first time, he is able to confront his girlfriend's worst news at least with courage (Campbell, 1992: 69).

#### 4. Conclusion

Possible worlds are character-centered. From identifying possible worlds, analyzing the switch, the blending and the embedment of different possible worlds, we can easily conceptualize the traces of the characters' physical and psychological movements. From analyzing the conflicts of alternate possible worlds, especially the private worlds, we can conveniently catch the development of plot, experience the formation of the fictional universe. Putting them in the domain of intersubjectivity, we can clearly detect the relationship between self, others, world, nature, ideal and reality, past and present. Hence, the writing crafts and stylistic choices are apt to appreciate, the understanding of the internal structure is deepened and the interpretation of the theme is enhanced.

Following are the main messages conveyed in the story. Firstly, the mental states of the people in the drying-out facility, especially J.P. and the narrator, are not steady. Alcoholism has partly destroyed their body and mind, and brought their lives into a mess. Their intersubjective relationship between self, between them and others become inharmonious. They are estranged and deserted. Secondly, they have the intention to stop drinking and come back to normal life, but their powers are not enough, they need the external help. Things trivial as a kiss or a hello can rescue them from the abyss. But their reluctance to communicate makes their estranged situation worse. Thirdly, escapism has solidified as a principle of their actions. J.P is the only person who is courageous to mediate his past and anatomize his problems. So in the end he succeeds in reuniting with his wife. Putting it simply, Carver probes "the fragmentary and alienated condition of the

twentieth-century itself”, “the waste and destructiveness that prevail beneath the affluence of American life” (Nesset 1995: 4).

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