

Power, Perception, and Language in Raymond Carver's Cathedral: A CDA Perspective

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Abstract

This study presents a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Raymond Carver's short story *Cathedral* (1981) with the aim of examining how language constructs identity, negotiates power relations, and reveals underlying belief systems. Adopting an interpretivist research paradigm and an inductive qualitative approach, the study analyzes selected dialogues and narrative segments through Fairclough's CDA framework, complemented by thematic discourse analysis. Key discourse parameters include identity construction, power and dominance, ideology and belief, politeness strategies, metaphor, framing, and silence. The findings demonstrate that Carver's minimalist language encodes complex social meanings and traces the narrator's transformation from emotional detachment and stereotyping to empathy and self-awareness. The analysis reveals how everyday language functions as a powerful social tool that both reflects and reshapes ideologies related to disability, human connection, and perception. This article contributes to discourse-oriented literary studies and offers methodological value for researchers

and students, particularly within the Pakistani academic context, where CDA-based literary analysis remains underexplored.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, Cathedral, Raymond Carver, identity, power, ideology, discourse and literature

Introduction

Language in literary texts functions not merely as a vehicle for storytelling but as a social practice through which identities, ideologies, and power relations are constructed and negotiated. Discourse analysis (DA), particularly Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), provides a systematic framework for uncovering these deeper meanings embedded in texts. Raymond Carver's short story *Cathedral* offers a compelling site for such an inquiry due to its minimalist style, reliance on dialogue, and subtle representation of personal transformation.

Cathedral narrates the encounter between an unnamed narrator and Robert, a blind man who visits the narrator's home. Through seemingly ordinary conversations, the story depicts the narrator's gradual shift from prejudice and emotional distance to empathy and insight. While existing literary criticism has examined the story from psychological, symbolic, and thematic perspectives, relatively little attention has been paid to how discourse itself facilitates this transformation. This study addresses that gap by applying CDA to selected dialogues in *Cathedral*, demonstrating how language reflects and reshapes social beliefs, power dynamics, and identity.

Statement of the Problem

Literary texts often encode social meanings through subtle linguistic choices that are overlooked when analysis focuses solely on plot or theme. In *Cathedral*, Carver employs simple, everyday language that conceals complex ideologies related to disability, masculinity, and emotional expression. Limited research has systematically examined how discourse features such as politeness, silence, and framing contribute to meaning-making in the story. This study seeks to uncover how language in *Cathedral* functions as a site of ideological struggle and personal transformation.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to discourse-based literary analysis by demonstrating the applicability of CDA to short fiction. It is particularly significant for students and researchers in linguistics, TESOL, and literature, as it illustrates how discourse analytical tools can enrich literary interpretation. Within the Pakistani academic context, where CDA has been predominantly applied to political and media texts, this study extends its application to Western literary fiction, thereby broadening the scope of discourse studies.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how language in *Cathedral* constructs identity, power relations, and belief systems.
2. To analyze selected dialogues using CDA and thematic discourse parameters.

Research Questions

1. How does language in Raymond Carver's *Cathedral* construct identity, reflect power dynamics, and reveal underlying ideologies?
2. How are discourse elements identified and interpreted through a CDA framework?

Literature Review

Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis examines language beyond the sentence level, focusing on how meaning is constructed in social contexts (Gee, 2014). CDA, as advanced by Fairclough (1995, 2013), emphasizes the relationship between language, power, and ideology, viewing discourse as both socially shaped and socially shaping. CDA has been widely applied to political, media, and educational texts but remains underutilized in literary studies, particularly in short fiction.

Thematic Discourse Analysis

Thematic analysis involves identifying recurring patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When combined with CDA, thematic analysis allows researchers to trace ideological and emotional shifts across a text while remaining grounded in linguistic evidence.

CDA and Literary Texts

Scholars such as Simpson (2004) and Mills (1995) argue that literary discourse often relies on indirectness, metaphor, and silence, making it particularly suitable for CDA. Studies on *Cathedral* have explored psychological distance (Peterson, 2012) and narrative minimalism (Wang, 2024), yet few have employed a systematic CDA framework. This study builds on previous research by integrating CDA with thematic analysis to examine discourse as a vehicle for transformation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, which examines (a) textual features, (b) discursive practices, and (c) social practices. Language is viewed as a means of constructing social reality, not merely reflecting it. The framework is complemented by thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of meaning related to isolation, connection, and transformation.

Key discourse parameters include identity construction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), power and dominance, ideology (Eagleton, 1991), politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008), framing, and silence (Jaworski, 1993).

Methodology

Research Paradigm

The study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes subjective meaning and contextual interpretation. This paradigm is particularly suited to literary discourse analysis, where texts are understood as representations of social and psychological realities.

Research Approach and Design

An inductive qualitative approach is employed, allowing patterns and interpretations to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori. The research design is text-based and analytical, focusing on selected dialogues from *Cathedral*.

Data Selection

The corpus consists of carefully selected dialogues and narrative excerpts from *Cathedral* that are rich in discourse features relevant to the study's objectives. These excerpts are analyzed using CDA parameters.

Ethical Considerations

As the study is based on a published literary text, ethical concerns are minimal. Academic integrity is maintained through accurate citation and objective analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

Analysis and Discussion

The present discussion integrates the findings of the discourse analysis with the theoretical positions and empirical studies reviewed earlier, thereby situating the analysis of *Cathedral*

within broader CDA-informed literary scholarship. In line with Fairclough's (1995, 2013) assertion that discourse is both socially constitutive and socially conditioned, the language used by the narrator reflects dominant societal ideologies at the beginning of the story and gradually participates in their transformation.

Identity Construction and Transformation

The literature review emphasized that identity is not a fixed attribute but is dynamically constructed through interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The findings of this study strongly support this claim. At the outset of *Cathedral*, the narrator's identity is linguistically constructed through distancing strategies, such as impersonal references and stereotypical descriptions of blindness. These features align with Peterson's (2012) observation that Carver's use of demonstratives and nominal choices creates psychological distance between the narrator and Robert. However, as interaction progresses, the narrator's discourse shifts toward collaborative and inclusive language, reflecting an emergent identity rooted in empathy and shared experience.

This transformation echoes Simpson's (2004) argument that literary discourse often conveys character development indirectly, through subtle shifts in tone and interactional patterns rather than explicit self-reflection. The narrator's eventual willingness to follow Robert's instructions while drawing the cathedral illustrates how identity is re-negotiated through discourse, supporting CDA's view of identity as performative and context-dependent.

Power Relations and Discursive Negotiation

Consistent with CDA literature, power in *Cathedral* is neither static nor unidirectional. Early interactions position the narrator as dominant due to his control over the narrative voice and physical space of the home. This reflects Fairclough's (1995) notion of power as embedded in discourse practices. However, as identified in the analysis, power gradually shifts during the drawing scene, where Robert assumes the role of guide. This role reversal aligns with Van Dijk's (1993) view that discourse can challenge dominant social hierarchies rather than merely reproduce them.

The findings also resonate with Mills' (1995) work on discourse and power in fiction, which highlights how authority may be exercised subtly through politeness and guidance rather than overt domination. Robert's use of positive politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987) allows him to exercise influence without threatening the narrator's face, thereby facilitating emotional openness and trust.

Ideology, Belief Systems, and Social Taboos

The literature review identified ideology as a central concern of CDA, particularly in relation to normalized beliefs about disability (Eagleton, 1991). The narrator's early discourse reflects culturally embedded assumptions about blindness, largely informed by media representations, as also noted by Wang (2024). These ideologies surface linguistically through generalizations, hesitations, and humor, functioning as discursive strategies that maintain emotional distance.

As the story progresses, these ideological positions are destabilized. The narrator's admission of disbelief and emotional uncertainty corresponds with Fairclough's (2013) claim that discourse can become a site of ideological struggle. The findings suggest that *Cathedral* does not merely represent a personal awakening but also critiques broader social narratives surrounding disability, perception, and belief.

Silence, Minimalism, and Meaning-Making

The importance of silence and minimalism, emphasized in the literature by Jaworski (1993) and Carver scholars such as Sklenicka (2009), is strongly supported by the findings. Moments of silence in the story function as meaningful communicative acts rather than absences of language. The narrator's silence while drawing with closed eyes marks a turning point where experiential understanding replaces verbal explanation.

This aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic perspective, as recurring patterns of silence, hesitation, and minimal responses signal deeper thematic shifts toward connection and perception. The study thus reinforces the argument that minimalist literary discourse requires analytical approaches sensitive to what is implied rather than explicitly stated.

Contribution to CDA-Based Literary Studies

By integrating CDA with thematic analysis, this study responds directly to the research gap identified in the literature review. Previous studies on *Cathedral* have largely focused on

symbolism or psychological interpretation; however, this analysis demonstrates that discourse itself is central to meaning-making. In the Pakistani academic context, where CDA has predominantly been applied to political and media texts (Ali & Kazemian, 2015), this study extends its applicability to literary fiction, thereby broadening methodological possibilities for future research.

Overall, the discussion confirms that Carver's *Cathedral* exemplifies how everyday language can encode complex social meanings. The alignment between the findings and existing literature validates CDA as a robust framework for literary analysis and underscores the value of discourse-oriented approaches in uncovering ideological and identity-related dimensions of fiction.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Cathedral* operates as a rich site of discourse where language mediates identity, power, and belief. By applying CDA and thematic analysis, the research highlights how minimalist dialogue can encode profound social meanings. The findings underscore the value of discourse analysis in literary studies and encourage further research into fictional texts as sites of ideological negotiation.

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