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AN AESTHETICS OF "IDEALIZED HUMAN DESIRE" AND AN ETHOS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION, COMMUNION, AND PERSONAL GROWTH: A READING OF RAYMOND CARVER'S SHORT STORIES AS SEMIOPEN TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

AN AESTHETICS OF "IDEALIZED HUMAN DESIRE" AND AN ETHOS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION, COMMUNION, AND PERSONAL GROWTH: A READING OF RAYMOND CARVER'S SHORT STORIES AS SEMIOPEN TEXTS

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Raymond Carver's short stories are semiopen in their articulation of a psychological "tension" between openness and closure. They engage readers both by their ongoing storyness and "guided closure." Although various critics have described Carver's stories as minimalist or hyperrealist narratives, his stories remain open for readers who imaginatively explore Carver's characters, the focus of Carver's stories. Carver's neorealism explores characters' dreams and desires, and communicates their subconscious desires and inner lives to readers. Carver allows his characters to act upon their desires and explore possibilities for personal--and moral--growth, especially by communicating and bonding with others, and despite a difficult cultural environment. Rather than presenting overt moral themes, Carver's stories work indirectly and provide readers with "clues" about his characters and how they can obtain psychological growth and closure. This allows readers to work through ambiguities inherent in some stories. Instead of being merely nihilistic, as his negative critics have maintained, Carver's stories provide both openness and tentative, but not final, closure.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Robert Regan Eck and Ruth Saunders Eck, and to my sister, Deborah Joy Teal.

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Chapter 1

RAYMOND CARVER'S POPULAR RECEPTION, HIS CRITICAL RECEPTION, AND A NEW CRITICAL CONCEPTION OF HIS STORIES: AS SEMIOPEN TEXTS

Raymond Carver's short stories have powerfully affected both critical readers and uncritical readers. Some readers, however, find Carver's stories to be of poor quality. They complain that Carver's stories are bleak or dark in subject matter or theme, or that they are stories without significantly large plots or characters. Some complain about a flat, minimal style. Carver has been labeled a "minimalist" by most critics; others have labeled him a "neorealist" or "Dirty Realist." As Bill Delaney observes:

> Nearly everything written about Raymond Carver begins with two observations: he is a minimalist, and he writes about working class people. Even when the critic is sympathetic, this dual categorization tends to stigmatize Carver as a minor artist writing little stories about little people. (435)

However, despite the implications of these labels, and despite a number of negative critics, Carver's short stories gained a large receptive audience of readers and fellow writers. His critical reputation began to grow after Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976), and especially after Cathedral (1983), and it continues to grow.

In fact, Carver received various awards for his stories. In 1983, Carver was awarded a Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters; in 1988, Carver was inducted into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Carver's story collections were nominated for the National Book Award (1977), National Book Critics Circle Award (1983), and Pulitzer Prize (1984); and individual stories were awarded annual recognition in such anthologies as The Pushcart Prize, The Best American Short Stories, The Best Little Magazine Fiction, and Prize Stories.

This study is an exploration of the nature of Carver's achievement as a short story writer; its focus is to explain how his stories satisfy two basic, seemingly contradictory needs of readers: first, our need, as human beings, "to impose a closed structure on experience in order to make sense of it," and second, our need to explore without preconceived restrictions, that is, our deep-seated need as readers, and as human beings generally, for "non-closure" (Head 195-97). Carver's short stories articulate this psychological "tension" between openness and closure in a distinctive and pronounced way and thus may be described as semiopen texts.

Raymond Carver's short stories may be described as "open" to the extent that they fully engage readers by their storyness and coherent structure of formal elements: according to contemporary short story theory, Carver's stories are prototypical in their storyness and in their exploration of what

Charles E. May refers to as "idealized human desire." Short story theorists commenting upon Carver's stories point to the open nature of his stories--that they require, sustain, and stimulate engagement of reader participation, collaboration, and even (for Rohrberger) "cocreation."

However, Carver's own critical commentary of stories (and literature generally) discusses elements of stories that are not described by the commentary of these short story theorists. For Carver, and as manifested in his stories, stories should also contain moral content and moral significance. Also, and importantly, reading Carver's stories with a particular moral perspective--namely, concerning the overriding needs of human beings for personal growth, human communication, and the communion with others, gives his stories a greater degree of closure.

This quality of Carver's stories has been generally overlooked by his critical readers. But, I would maintain, Carver's stories are written to be read and reread to give readers this "guided closure." However, while Carver's stories are both open and provide closure, such closure is not complete: readers are free to review and reconsider the themes and ideas Carver presents. For although Carver maintains certain moral values as absolutes, he is primarily concerned in his stories with the process by which his characters' actions lead to their moral progress, including insight into their own lives and their personal victories: Carver's stories are not "minimally"

reductive, but they can give careful and engaged readers various depths of satisfactory closure, even if not all of his characters obtain such affirmative closure.

Carver's stories function dynamically with a narratological "tension" between openness and closure, and remain distinctively semiopen for their readers. Rereading Carver's stories from the perspectives of short story theory (which emphasizes their ongoing engagement for readers and their "openness") and with Carver's own critical sensibilities (which gives them a significant, but not always an obvious, measure of "guided closure") underscores their importance and significance for readers as semiopen texts.

Necessary to an appropriate assessment of Carver's literary achievement is an appreciation of Carver's stories in the context of genre criticism. Some short story theorists, most notably Susan Lohafer, Charles E. May, and Austin Wright, contribute particular commentary about Carver's short stories: they also describe and illuminate how his stories can be read for storyness, as stories. These and other short story theorists have described qualities of good stories generally and how such stories typically affect readers. Important works discussing short story theory include The Lonely Voice (Frank O'Connor, 1963); Hawthorne and the Modern Short Story (Mary Rohrberger, 1966); Mystery and Manners (Flannery O'Connor, 1969); Short Story Theories (Ed. Charles E. May, 1976); The Short Story (Ian Reid, 977); The Short Story: A Critical Introduction (Valerie Shaw,

1983); Re-reading the Short Story (Ed. Clare Hanson, 1989); Short Story Theory at a Crossroads (Eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, 1989); and The New Short Story Theories (Ed. Charles E. May, 1994). In addition, other commentary about short story theory or short stories in general will be cited in order to better describe and detail the nature and qualities of Carver's short stories.

In evaluating Carver's short stories in terms of short story theory, two general features will be considered: 1) a writer's use of the formal elements of a story, and 2) the storyness of a story. Carver's use of formal elements in a story needs more attention and investigation. For most theorists to be quoted, a story's form--its brevity, framing, and narrative movement--coheres to give readers a sense of story. Other formal elements include a story's whole range of language, including not only aspects and suggestions of tone, mood, and theme, but also specific metonymic and metaphoric elements. All elements that work to this sense of story and that reflect a story's short form and attendance to ending may be said to constitute its formal elements.

Despite their lingering reputations as minimalist or neorealist narratives, Carver's short stories have a number of thoughtfully coherent tropes and metonymic elements, which typically work subliminally upon readers of his short stories. Many of his stories that may seem to be minimally told are actually deeply structured and complex in their use of formal

elements. Carver's stories can be short, brief, and contain omissions, yet still fully engage readers. Although short story critics do not uniformly agree on all points, they do agree that because of its brevity, every detail in a short story matters, or should matter. In fact, for short story theorists generally, questions about a story's quality center upon its elements and their coherence--and not whether a story is large or elaborate. Genre critics of the short story bring a sensitivity to the evaluation of a particular short story writer's stories, and their insights are applicable to Carver's short stories, even though relatively little criticism of his work exists within this context.

This study does recognize some elements of "minimalism" in some of Carver's stories. For example, a Carver story may affect a reader significantly by what is omitted. Carver's What We Talk About When We Talk About Love most clearly exhibits this self-conscious minimalist technique, which requires a reader's full participation in the story, which is also a quality that short story theorists hold to be typical of well-crafted stories.

Some of Carver's stories also seem to fit the minimalist label, at times, because most of his stories are often quite short. However, because of the brevity of short stories generally, readers expect to read them more carefully than novels, reading their implications, tonalities, omissions, reading "between the lines"--and rereading them imaginatively after having read the ending. In this sense, then, length alone

does not make a typical short story "minimal." This understanding of how stories are read by readers, of how good stories are read by readers, and of what good stories can achieve, is relevant and necessary in exploring and evaluating Carver's stories; not only to answer charges of his "minimalist" critics, but, more importantly, to read and appreciate his stories.

Also, required of any critical analysis of Carver's stories is an appreciation of how his stories changed throughout his life. Critics such as Nesset, Saltzman, and Campbell make the point that Carver continued to grow as a writer and that his stories became fuller and less alike, beginning with Cathedral. A recovering alcoholic since 1977, Carver's fiction gradually moved away from his most minimalist period of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. While most of his stories may be similar in some ways, his stories changed as he continued to develop as a writer. In this study, I will explore what I consider to be stories that are typical of the body of his work, stories that are both characteristic and interesting.

In this study of Raymond Carver's stories, three general observations about his stories are important to recognize. First is the general popular reception of his stories. Some critics claim that he may even have been the short story writer most responsible for reviving interest in this genre in the United States. His stories are easy to read (on their surfaces), and most stories are short. The settings and characters are, almost

without exception, familiar to most readers. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, Carver's stories often have an immediate impact upon readers. As Lewis Buzbee observes, "Carver's stories have the power to move people deeply, immediately" (115).

Additionally, Carver's stories are well built, deeply structured, and individually cohere in ways both obvious and not obvious. To better appreciate this, these stories can be read again and again: they invite close reading and rereading. They typically use a number of formal elements to achieve their power and attraction for readers. Many, if not most, of these elements may not be obvious to most readers--uncritical and critical alike. In fact, many stories contain features not commented on by the majority of critical readers, but which nevertheless act to give coherence, complexity, and power to the stories.

Lastly, Carver's stories do exhibit storyness, which can be defined or described in various ways, including, primarily, as a continuous psychological engagement of readers. According to short story writer and theorist John Gerlach, "Story proper is more accurately defined by speculations it encourages on the part of the reader than by what actually occurs in the reported event" (80). Charles E. May in his introduction to <u>The New Short Story Theories</u> notes the "family resemblance" of features noted by short story theorists when they describe features of short stories. Storyness is the core feature of most stories, and readers who read and criticize short stories expect to locate this in short stories.

Carver's stories often have enigmatic endings, but, in most cases, they can be completed by readers rethinking the story or rereading the story in terms of its ending. In some instances, readers may have to reread or recall earlier parts of the story in order to reprocess the ending. In other cases, the reader may not be able to finally resolve the story in terms of its ending but will remain engaged by the story. Other stories have obvious closure. In all of these cases, the stories continue to engage readers, both intellectually and emotionally, after readers have read them, and this, in effect, constitutes their storyness.

Carver's stories may be further described as being constructed as a spiral: they are open because of their readability and how they reward a reader's attention and engaged reading; additionally, they invite a reader's expectation of closure and give some initial closure by their formal elements and deep structure. Together, these elements guide readers through the stories, moving readers, in effect, closer to the center of each story with each reading. In this way, also, by how these stories are read, Carver's stories may be described as semiopen.

Carver's seemingly ongoing attention to writing and revising his published stories--he revised almost continuously and republished various stories prior to Cathedral--underscores his own role as a reader, as well as how his stories are actually read by ordinary readers. Carver's own critical comments about stories, whether in his own published essays or in interviews

(such as in a 1984 interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory below), make clear this function of his writing as a process involving psychologically engaged readers:

> I guess I'm old-fashioned enough to feel that the reader must somehow be involved at the human level. And that there is still, or ought to be, a compact between writer and reader. Writing, or any form of artistic endeavor, is not just expression, it's communication. (110)

Likewise, in his essay "Fiction That Throws Light on Blackness," Carver elaborates his (often-disregarded) moral focus:

> In fiction that matters the significance of the action inside the story translates to the lives of people outside the story [readers of the story]. Do we need to remind ourselves of this? In the best novels and short stories, goodness is recognized as such. Loyalty, love, fortitude, courage, and integrity may not always be rewarded, but they are recognized as good or noble actions or qualities; and evil or base or simply stupid behavior is seen and held up for what it is: evil, base, or stupid behavior. There <u>are</u> a few absolutes in this life, some verities, if you will, and we would do well not to forget them. (184)

Carver's attention to what readers value and are engaged in while reading stories is clearly evidenced by his stories, which

while being seemingly objective, open, and transparent, also carefully guide readers in their reading and rereading of them. Again, I describe this combination of openness and guided closure as semiopen, and interpret Carver's short stories as being semiopen texts.

Basic to contemporary short story theory is the recognition of how stories affect and involve readers. Even Edgar Allan Poe's (1842) famous prescription for constructing powerfully written, finished tales, that they be conceived and designed so as to produce "a certain unique or single effect" (47), underscores this methodology in terms of a reader, the person for whom this "effect" is intended. Stories have been retold and reread throughout the world primarily because of their effect on and appeal to readers or audiences. To describe readers as audiences is appropriate inasmuch as readers of short stories expect to become imaginatively involved with their reading of them. Randall Jarrell makes the point in "Stories" that "children ask first of all: 'Is it a true story'? They ask this of the storyteller, but they ask of the story what they ask of dreams: that it satisfy their wishes" (3).

This comparison of stories to dreams also underscores their similar elemental or primary affect. Joyce Carol Oates describes the short story as:

> A dream verbalized, arranged in space and presented to the world, imagined as a sympathetic audience (and not, as the world really is, a busy and indifferent

> crowd): the dream is said to be some kind of manifestation of desire, perhaps only partly expressed, but the most interesting thing about it is its mystery. (214)

As in dreams, stories can dramatize qualities of myth, primal joys and fears, and other powerful emotional states in an elemental way, appealing not only to the conscious mind, but more significantly, to the unconscious. Also, the brevity of the short story, which like a dream can be imaginatively experienced in one "sitting," gives the story an "intensity which the novel is unable to sustain" (Reid 2). Valerie Shaw comments that some short stories attempt to overcome the discursive and linear properties of prose by deepening rather than extending a situation (75). To the extent that stories exhibit dreamlike, mythical, or primal psychological states, they continue to emotionally engage readers. Significantly, Carver's own aesthetic about the writing and the reading of stories establishes the priority of first engaging readers emotionally: "The story should certainly be connecting up emotionally at first, and then it should be an intellectual connecting up" (O'Connell 142).

Carver's stories, also, do provide--and usually sometime after they are immediately first read--an "intellectual connecting up" for readers. Carver's stories not only explore human emotions, and, especially, human desire; they also explore and communicate the various challenges his characters experience

to act ethically and authentically in their attempts to become more fully human: to develop as individuals, and, also, to communicate, empathize, and commune with others. Various characters in Carver's short stories struggle to break free from their confining circumstances, including isolation and withdrawal, characteristics typically associated with the so-called "minimalist" aesthetic. Carver's stories do engage in moral complexities and moral struggles and in overriding themes of moral exploration and closure, whether achieved by or denied to his characters. Raymond Carver's stories are primarily stories of process, of "living characters" who struggle. These stories provide guided closure but never final closure, remaining semiopen for engaged readers to imaginatively participate in these same struggles.

Chapter 2

MINIMALISM AND RAYMOND CARVER

Raymond Carver disliked the term "minimalism" as a description of the style of his short stories. For him, the term connoted a "smallness of vision" (Simpson and Buzbee 44). After his most minimalist period, he restored and republished some stories that were initially pared down to fit into What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (1981). But even after the publication of Cathedral (1983), a volume of short stories that most critics recognized as being fuller, longer, and more complete than his previous (more minimalist stories), the "minimalist" label stuck to Carver's work as a whole. The winter 1985 issue of the Mississippi Review devoted a double issue to minimalist fiction, and while Kim Herzinger, the managing editor, placed the adopted term in quotes ("minimalist"), the critical label stuck to Carver's stories--and for many critics, still does.

Despite Adam Meyer's rather conclusive essay "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism" (1989), in which he details Carver's changing aesthetic after What We Talk About (in which his stories become fuller, more detailed, more complete and require little or no revision; and despite William Stull's essay "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver" (1985), in which

Stull writes about Carver's changing style, which matched his changing themes of increased affirmation--beginning with the title story of Cathedral--despite these accounts, Carver's oeuvre and style are still today regarded by too many critics as "minimalist." As Cynthia J. Whitney Hallet observes:

> Despite Carver's continued success in the latter part of his career, it was his special brand of fiction that initially thrust him into the literary limelight and that, in spite of his objections, contains his most identifying trademark--minimalism (49).

The term "minimalism" gained additional currency with the publication of (and apparent reader demand for) stories written by other writers in the 1980's that seemed to several critics as belonging to a literary group: minimalists. In response to the perceived tenor of these stories, critics such as Diane Stevenson complained of a retreat of authorial vision: shifting from "perception" and "interpretation" to merely describing "the external": "[W]riters like Ann Beattie and Raymond Carver are minimalists who revise the old double form-context into a new single format. Surface is reality. Reality is code" (87). For some readers, what seems missing in Carver's stories is "significance"; what remains are mere signs (or referents). The "surface-is-all-there-is" charge is not the only one some critics have offered, although it still retains a currency today.

Peter Andrew Williams distinguishes between "real" minimalist texts--he cites those of Samuel Beckett, Gertrude

Stein, William Carlos Williams, Marguerite Duras, and Robert Creeley--which are "so highly unconventional that they call into question the traditional ways we have of approaching literary texts," and so-called minimalists, such as Carver, who generate the "'spare' or anorexic versions of representations seen in postmodern literary works" (7). Mentioning Carver by name, Williams describes his characters as "anarchic because the reasons for their behavior remain undisclosed" (79); also, Carver's narrative scenes "seem unprompted and unmotivated, timeless, airless and subtracted from any sense of historical continuity or genesis" (79). Williams sums up Carver's style:

> There is nothing but the surface there, the world and its characters just is, and the means by which we typically understand it is thrown into a liberating confusion, a confusion which compels simple acceptance rather than discovery (80).

Although Williams does distinguish between "real" minimalists, (who, for him, question our perception and understanding of reality) from those writers, such as Carver, who are commonly labeled minimalists, this distinction is overstated. Certainly Carver's stories also question our perception of reality and our sense of who and what we are. Some of Carver's stories appear upon their surface-contexts to be fragmentary or skein-like. But are they really "minimalist" in being pared down or incomplete, or are they "really" minimalist by questioning reality? In determining the nature of Carver's stories as

semiopen texts, it is useful first to look at an agreed upon definition of minimalism to see how any of his stories are "minimalist" stories, how they are more than "minimalist" stories, and how readers have typically become engaged by them.

In "A Few Words About Minimalism," John Barth describes a "cardinal principle" of the minimalist aesthetic: "Artistic effect may be enhanced by a radical economy of artistic means, even where such parsimony compromises other values: completeness, for example, or richness or precision of statement" (1).

Barth sums up the "minimal esthetic," appropriately enough, using an example of the "minimal" style: "In short, less is more" (25). Barth traces the genre early trumped as a possible form for minimalist or spare prose, and he quotes and paraphrases major American authors writing in this genre who have also contributed to the emergence of the "minimalist" style:

> The genre of the short story, as Poe distinguished it from the traditional tale in his 1842 review of Hawthorne's first collection of stories, is an early manifesto of modern narrative minimalism: "In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency . . . is not to the pre-established design. . . .Undue length is . . . to be avoided." Poe's codification informs such later 19th century masters of terseness, selectivity and implicitness (as opposed to leisurely once-upon-a-timelessness, luxuriant abundance, explicit and extended analysis)

> as Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekov. Show, don't tell, said Henry James in effect and at length in his prefaces to the 1908 New York edition of his novels. And don't tell a word more than you absolutely need to, added young Ernest Hemingway, who thus described his "new theory" in the early 1920's: "You could omit anything if you knew that you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood." (2)

Summing up, then, Barth notes that minimalism is a style that derives from a "radical economy of artistic means"; it is well-suited (according to Poe) to the short story because of its selectivity of language and by its short (overall) length; and it works by implication (if not always by explication): it is a style that can "show" as well as "tell." It seems obvious that if such a style can achieve all of this, it must clearly engage readers. Barth notes that some "short works of great rhetorical, emotional and thematic richness" do exist, and he cites some contemporary works by Borges and Beckett (2).

Barth also makes a crucial point: that "old or new, fiction can be minimal in any or all of several ways" (2). It seems reasonable, therefore, that rather than lumping the works of similar writers or their stories together, looking closer at elements of minimalism in their stories might be a better way of understanding and describing these writers' stories. Barth outlines three ways stories can exhibit minimalism:

[1] "minimalism of unit, form, and scale. . . ."

[2] "minimalism of style. . . ." [and]

[3] "minimalism of material. . ." (2).

But Barth further contends that when "found together in their purest forms" they describe a literary nihilism (2). (Barth quickly adds that "they are not always found together" [2].)

This suggestion, that nihilism, in effect, acts as a shadow of minimalism, forms the core of concern of another group of critics, who go beyond criticizing Carver's most minimalist stories as being slight or superficial: this group sees such stories as nihilistic: when such stories are mimetic, they represent the nihilism present in American culture; when such stories are somehow incomplete or "hyperrealistic," they likewise underscore a menacing nihilism. Dean Flower comments that Carver's "method suggests that the other seven-eighths [of the submerged story] either isn't there or isn't knowable" (281). I will look at and discuss such concerns more fully in Chapter 3.

Broadly considered, there exist minimalisms of style (or language), form (or size), and content (including references to theme, story, plot, and significance). Many of Carver's negative critics complain about the tone, theme, or content (including the significance of characters) of Carver's most minimal stories. As alluded to above, they typically find the stories superficial or nihilistic, in some way. In this chapter, I would like to first consider Carver's use of language and his so-called minimal style of writing. Before discussing more holistic or larger aspects of

stories, a story's language seems to be a logical place to start. Subsequent chapters will examine more closely other aspects of minimalism in his stories. (Chapter 3 distinguishes between "minimalism" and "neorealism"--two terms that are often conflated by Carver's critics.)

Some commentary about the suitability of a style of writing of short stories that requires that readers be closely engaged readers has been noted by some critics and some short story theorists: not only should everything count in a short story (to give it an aesthetic unity and significance for a reader); stories should work by each of their formal elements, including language, to more fully engage readers. One element, of course, is the language itself and how a reader comes to read the language, how he or she processes it and interacts with it. According to Kim Herzinger:

> "Minimalists" seem to be interested in the more purely communicative properties of fiction, and they find that communication is best obtained without hollering, condescending, or directing. For its part, the audience is asked to attend to what is being said and, as importantly, to what is not being said. (15)

By reading "between the lines" and by reading for implications and omissions, closely attentive readers of stories that do <u>not</u> tell all of what they have to say can gain insights that require that readers think through the implications of what is said compared with what is shown in stories--and to accept the

seeming zero-context of omissions of dialogue or narrative to sharpen an understanding of a story's depth of implication. For example, for Michael Trussler, Carver's "minimal" style, which highlights omission and indeterminacy of a story's meaning, gives his stories a provisionality while still suggesting a deeper story "beneath the page" (35-36). This observation complements those by theorists such as Gerlach, Lohafer, and Rohrberger, who contend that a story's literary identity is manifested by its deep and continuous engagement for readers during and, perhaps, more significantly, after its having been read. Commenting on Trussler's emphasis of indeterminacy in Carver's style of writing, Arthur F. Bethea agrees that such "indeterminacy" has an "appeal" to readers:

> In reader-response terms, when we read Carver, we do more of the writing. (Or at least we have this illusion; the meaning-creating power of Carver's indirect rhetoric should not be underestimated.) For those of us desiring more power, stories with less explicit direction might be more pleasing. (117)

Stories that "show" more than they "tell"--that contain omissions or spaces in dialogue or narrative--may also require better readers of stories than readers of stories that resemble explication more than narrative. If Picasso is correct in his assertion (paraphrased here) that "Art is a lie that tells the truth," readers of such "lies" or fictions must process these by looking not only at what is demonstrated on the "surface." Close

readers must read in-depth: that is, looking below, behind, or beneath the surface. Perhaps paradoxically, if "minimalistic" fiction is to have significance, it must also involve a reader to see into what is not fully presented (or represented); and this is not always easy for many readers, including critical readers. As Linsey Abrams notes,

> Minimalist fiction delivers wisdom in the manner of a Zen Koan: either you get it or you don't. The thrust of such work is anti-linguistic or supra-linguistic, in that places of depth within characters and situations are rarely explicated by words. Shared understanding, between author and reader, if shared they be, occur according to implicit structure. (24)

Of course, I would add, one such structure is language and that, more often than is apparent, Carver's concise phrasing foregrounds meaning and point. However, language in a Carver story works by telling omission, implication, and indirection, as well.

What matters for most of Carver's readers, I believe, is not just a "surface" of language (or even described events) but an illusion of duration and the suggested significance of characters' experiences existing in space and time: in other words, a story, a facsimile existing in four dimensions, which also involves readers by its representational spaces (omissions, pauses, "breathes"), which mimic the act of reading itself (with its pauses and "re-visions"). In this sense, all narratives of

point--that is, those subject to interpretation--are processed by readers and are manifest within spaces of holographic time and engage readers by that fact alone: by their use of characters living their "lives" in "time." The same depth of psychological engagement is not necessarily true for readers of exposition--or for heavy-handed, two-dimensional tales of morality. The absence of overt rhetoric and one-dimensional language are prerequisites that make narrative possible. An unobtrusive so-called minimalist use of language in a story (or as a part of its narrative) does not necessarily prevent readers from reading a story's deepest "messages" and implications. In fact, readers who can become more fully engaged by anticipating reading "between the lines" will probably gain more from the experience than from reading stories that require less thinking (that require less from readers, both emotionally and intellectually).

In Coming to Terms with the Short Story, Susan Lohafer refers to one of Carver's techniques associated with minimal language usage: "omission," often being the contrast between what a narrator (or character) says and what he or she does not say:

> As we read Carver's own prose, we become aware of much that's unsaid. . . .Of course we, as readers, have been primed with carefully selected, highly focused slides of information, all waiting for their cumulative significance to be made clear. . . . (64)

Readers, according to Lohafer, ask questions in reading a Carver story. In "They're Not Your Husband," for example, a

reader may ask "[W]hat is the husband thinking as he observes the other man's wink? Why is it that he doesn't speak up?" (64). Lohafer adds: "For us a sentence like 'He didn't say anything' has already gained unstated meaning, and will itself become part of the unstated meaning of sentences to come" (64). From this questioning and drawing of inferences, Lohafer is able to not only identify a "subtext," but also a meaning "[b]eyond that," beyond what she describes as "the first level of implication" (64). Summarizing this process of reading in-depth by attending to omissions of a character's speech, non-actions, and without omniscient references to a character's inner psychological state, a reader reads by inferences made and implications considered: "These thin sentences offer a kind of anomaly--easy physical closure, fairly easy immediate cognitive closure, but far from easy, even deliberately difficult, deferred cognitive closure" (64).

By an author not giving readers the immediate satisfaction provided by articulate speech or self-knowledgeable characters, but instead relying upon inarticulate and uncertain characters, such as Earl in "They're Not Your Husband," readers must act to fill in gaps. As more than one critic has noted, readers are asked at times to be semiologists (Broyard 27). Even so, engaged (or committed) readers are often rewarded by stories that provide missing elements. Jeffrey Kenneth Birkenstein argues that Carver's most minimal stories are the most satisfactory because they don't distract readers with "extra information" (74). For

Birkenstein, Carver's most "essential" stories "capture fleeting moments of insight, moments that hold a unique power to transcend the ordinary life of uncommon commoners" (46). Readers differ, of course, in their reading of the psychological significance and "power" of stories and the language within stories, but for many readers, at least, Carver's "minimal" use of language--that is, in particular, during his most "minimalist" period--is both sufficient and engaging.

Some critics have observed that that which is omitted, or what appears as gaps or silences in a Carver story, also serves to emphasize what one critic calls Carver's "arch-seme"--the sense of menace (Chénetier 172). The unseen danger or unspoken tension is often presented as a threat to a Carver character, and this continues a reader's psychological engagement. From "On Writing," Carver describes how his stories generate tension both by what they present and by what they omit:

> What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible notion of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things. (26)

Regarding his plain style of phrasing and economy of phrasing, Carver affirms that such a style is "perfectly clear, but still a language capable of carrying complex ideas and sophisticated nuances" (Schumacher 230). One effect of this

plain style is that it draws attention to any deviation from it (in register or accent)--whether by speech, narrative, or even individual word. According to Marilynn Robinson, Carver's "impulse to simplify is like an attempt to create a hush, not to hear less but to hear better" (1). Although her reference is not just specifically regarding Carver's use of language, it seems most appropriate about the ability of ordinary language, or even pared-down language that is "perfectly clear," to capture and resonate nuance and tone. Ann Beattie links the plain style of effective predication to dramatic affect: "Stylistically, Carver's short declarative sentences produce a clever effect: his matter-of-factness, his detached observation of events, gains power as the events become increasingly odd and discomfiting" (178). Likewise, Beattie points to a character's silence as affecting and often troubling a reader (180). A plain style and omission work together in Carver's stories and often dynamically, to psychologically engage his readers.

Whether Carver's most minimal style is truly minimalistic or just sparsely economic may never be resolvable, but Carver does, at times, give his characters an ear for their own speech and an appreciation for what they say and for what they meant to say. At times, the stories' narrators or characters make the point that a character did not know why he or she said something. Wayne in "Signals" and Myers in "Put Yourself In My Shoes" are two examples of these. Often, in Carver's stories, his characters are sensitive to individual words of speech and

language, but more significantly, Carver's own writing style is, also, precise. David Lipsky calls Carver not a minimalist but a "precisionist" (52).

Objections to the pared-down plain style of Carver's so-called minimalist style fall into different groups, although they may overlap. Carver's negative critics of his minimalist style typically move their critiques from style to substance, affirming that the limited style bespeaks a meager or nihilistic subject matter. Rarely are such criticisms confined to Carver's style alone. For the majority of these critics, a working definition of "minimalism" includes attributes of style, form, and content combined into a single linguistic entity. Whether they complain that minimalism excludes a larger vision of the world or literature's possibilities to describe that world, or whether they dislike the "minimalist" worldview precisely because it reflects a society that is itself without a vision or direction, these critics typically shift the impetus of their criticism from the story's language to the language of its characters to a character's actions to implications about a story's vision or sensibility. For these critics, the stories themselves are either too small or too bleak--or both. I will address these concerns more fully later, but here, I believe, it is useful to try to account for and answer some of these complaints by looking at how the language used in Carver's stories may contribute to these negative views. [Note: With the exception of Furious Seasons, all citations of Carver's short stories refer to the

Vintage editions.]

As mentioned earlier, menace is the "arch-seme" of many of Carver's stories, and this typically requires that the menacing idea or fear not be articulated. Of course, oftentimes, as well, it remains unarticulated because many, if not most, of Carver's characters are inarticulate. Many of his characters are alcoholic, withdrawn, seemingly unable to communicate comfortably with spouses, lovers, or friends. These inarticulate characters, for whatever reasons, also sometimes fail to describe their own wishes and desires. When characters do speak up, in recognition of some significant event (for them), they may respond vaguely or incompletely--as many people typically do--such as Les's father in "Sacks," who in the act of narration, begins to articulate the meaning of two significant past experiences, but never finally does so: "I'll tell you, Les. I'll tell you what's the most important thing here. You see, there are things. More important things than your mother leaving me. . ." (What 44).

Additionally, Carver's characters are often presented in stories when they are just at the point of considering something or realizing some thought, which for them remains unarticulated. For example, at the end of "Are You a Doctor?" Arnold Breit answers his wife's questions with a "considered" silence, a silence that marks his newer and more aware sense of self. This story concludes soon after "He remained silent and considered her voice" (Will? 40), and it is this plain style and effused and considered silence that give much of this story's psychological

affect for a reader. It is doubtful if a more exuberant style could improve upon Carver's own careful and plain-styled prose here.

"Cathedral," Carver's first story moving away from his most "minimalist" phase, concludes with the narrator's epiphany rendered as: "'It's really something,' I said" (Cathedral 228). Again, the character's speech is not only appropriate for the story's ending, being an appropriate response for that character: it really is climactic for that character. But, regardless of how articulate Carver's characters are, his use of simple or ordinary language and the language of silences effectively capture "fleeting" or "transcending" moments, and in those moments, the felt and heightened emotion of these characters.

Carver's characters can also be seemingly frozen--unable to speak. The criticism of his characters' inarticulateness is usually directed towards so-called passive characters who fail to respond verbally (however prosaically) to their menacing "moments." I would point out, however, that Carver's characters act authentically in these cases: fear or incomprehension freezes them, and these are natural human responses that many readers both accept and appreciate. Even in a less successful story, such as "Where Is Everyone?" Carver's craft of narration can let readers imagine how a character might feel, by his or her silence and non-action:

> I lay there staring at the TV. There were images of uniformed men on the screen, a low murmur, then tanks

> and a man using a flamethrower. I couldn't hear the sound, but I didn't want to get up. I kept staring until I felt my eyes close. But I woke up with a start, the pajamas damp with sweat. A snowy light filled the room. There was a roaring coming at me. The room clamored. I lay there. I didn't move. (Fires 183)

Likewise, the communal response of characters, who for hours discussed "what we talk about when we talk about love," ends with a too-quiet silence, foregrounding the fears and other human impulses of their beating hearts. Heavier rhetoric or a more lavish style, again, could hardly be more effective here in letting readers imagine the essential emotions of these very "human" characters. In stories in which characters feel trapped, or frozen and unable to act otherwise, such as in the ending of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the narrative seems highly appropriate and engaging for readers who can imagine themselves in a scene, feeling what the characters "feel": "Gin's gone," Mel said. Terri said, "Now what?" 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 (What 154). Oftentimes, in Carver's stories, his characters' silences and omissions help to imaginatively create for readers the illusion of their status as people because such pauses in speech suggest minds that are sensitive to the possibilities of their own voices. By contrast, flat characters

would lack this sensitivity to voiced language.

In "Laughter and Bloodshed," Michael Gorra, a typical critic of "minimalist" narrative, describes Carver as:

> The chief practitioner of what's been called "American minimalism," a mannerist mode in which the intentional poverty, the anorexia, of the writer's style is mimetic of the spiritual poverty of his or her characters' lives, their disconnection from everything like a traditional community. It is a prose so attenuated that it can't support the weight of a past or a future, but only a bare notation of what happens, now; a "slice of life" in which the characters are seen without the benefit of antecedents or social context. They rarely have last names. Such a world is confusing, not just for a reader who expects characters to come with surnames, but for the characters themselves. If nothing can be expected on the basis of the past, then each new moment can bewilder a character, freeze him or her into a confusion of inaction. Carver in particular is famous for the passivity with which his characters confront or fail to confront, their experience. (155)

This is, perhaps, a representative passage of Carver's most negative critics and, as such, deserves appropriate comment with regard to Carver's use of language: Is it really "anorexic"? Looking at passages of Carver's themes cited above, it seems

obvious to me that Carver's prose is not "mimetic of the spiritual poverty of his . . . character's lives" nor is his "prose so attenuated that it can't support the weight of a past or future." While not every story of Carver's is perfectly crafted, most are carefully written. As mentioned earlier, Carver won critical recognition and popular reception for his stories. In fact, the general consensus is that his range of storytelling became wider, and that he continued to develop as a writer, throughout his lifetime. Although I grant that few stories span any considerable period of time (whether in the past or in the future--or in the present), this is appropriate for short stores; the novel is a more suitable genre for extended chronology.

It is also true that although many of Carver's characters do not verbally "confront their experience" (many lack this fluency), most are sensitive to the moment or situation of potential change (or character growth). For example, the narrator of "Fat" is not especially articulate, but she speaks with conviction at the end of the story when she says, "My life is going to change. I feel it" (Will? 8). Her attentiveness, her increasing awareness of her experiences, and her strong emotions are displayed throughout this short story as she "defends" the fat man from abuse: "He can't help it, I say, so shut up" (6). Likewise, in very simple language, the reader perceives his effect upon her:

> Is everything all right? I say.

> Fine, he says, and he puffs. Excellent, thank you, he says and puffs again.
>
> Enjoy your dinner, I say. I raise the lid of his sugar bowl and look in. He nods and keeps looking at me until I move away. I know now I was after something. But I don't know what. (6)

Clearly, the fat man has distracted her sensibilities and later she tells the fat man, "You are welcome, I say--and a feeling comes over me"(7). The fat man's influence extends to her imagination while having sex, and it continues to influence her imagined sense of herself: "I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (8). What may be most remarkable about this passage is the narrator's lively--not anorexic--imaginative "life"; the exact nature and specifics of the fat man's influence over the waitress (narrator and protagonist) is not articulated: much of the power of the story is because of this fact. Readers are thereby encouraged to read "between the lines" to remain engaged with the story, in order to assimilate the narrator's experiences and her unarticulated feelings and desires. We might ask, What exactly is the influence of the fat customer upon her? Is it even possible to fully describe it? Rather than make everything in a story studiously explicit, Carver allows room for a reader to imaginatively become more fully engaged in a story by withholding select "information," yet still including, I suspect, a sense of mystery, certainly one quality of human sensibilities. Sean

O'Faolain's assertion, "Telling never dilates the mind with suggestion as implication does" (151), underscores how a good and engaging story remains semiopen for readers, being subject to re-vision (re-reading) and some ongoing speculation.

Indeed, part of the psychological engagement of a reader in a moment or scene involves the notion of "defamiliarization," a process involving a shift or destabilization of a character's sense of his or her identity and "reality." Essential for this defamiliarization to work in a story (for readers) is an author using the techniques of suggestion and implication (stories that are oversaturated with information and articulated knowledge tend to "get bogged down"). As if to underscore the differences in the language of explication and narrative, Carver wrote "Blackbird Pie," in which the loss of the scholar's wife calls into question the viability, accuracy, and relevance of the scholar's sense of his world and of his place in it. The scholar, a historian, realizes at the end of the story that because his wife left him, he will now have to go on "without history" (Where 510). The story seems to make the point that without a personal history, one that is "transtextual"--no explication of events really "matters." Carver's stories, though sometimes employing pared-down language and omissions, seek to convey the understanding of what in Carver's words is "recognizably human" (including feelings of defamiliarization), and what it means to have a personal history--or story ("On Writing" 24).

The "record" of such a story, as the bereft historian (and narrator) notes, includes "its scraps and tirades, its silences and innuendoes" (511). For careful readers, such signs become significant and work together: by these, readers and characters gain an understanding of others. Carver's stories include "silences and innuendoes," but these are not vacancies or lapses. Like the invisible air we breathe and communicate with one another in, such spaces are a part of our sense of ourselves as human beings--Carver's incorporation of spaces and his sensitivity to silences actually contribute much to the thematic context of his stories. The authorial tone or sensibility is, perhaps, Taoist in this sense: that reality is a seemingly dynamic process, of which "empty" space is a necessary component. (Both music and the human voice are produced by rhythms and tonalities that range between sounds and silences.)

Rather than presenting static human beings, Carver's stories show the forces that immobilize the natural (normal) human drives to "connect" with others, both emotionally and intellectually. Acceptance of others' voices is a liberating theme throughout Carver's work, especially in his later stories. During his most minimal phase in his writing, he details the inarticulateness, isolation, or insularity of many of these characters by using one or more elements of a "minimal" style of writing, which requires that readers look at the characters more closely, to ask questions about them, and to take them, consequently, more seriously and more compassionately: the style

draws attention to their hesitancies and "omissions," emphasizes the significance of what they have trouble saying or doing, while, at the same time, allows ourselves as readers to draw inferences and to collect verbal and other linguistic "clues," which together help us to better understand them.

Much of the negative criticism of Carver's style during his most minimalist period has to do with his characters' lack of self-directed articulation. Because many of the critics may prefer more assertively inflected voices and positive resolutions for those characters, they complain that these voices are withdrawn, inarticulate, halting, befuddled, uncertain, slight, or mean-spirited. Some complaints about Carver's rendering of their voices include: "the monotonous use of colloquialisms, the prime-time sitcom speeches" (Pope 333); "the authorial suppression of polyphony" (Clark 240); characters' voices that are "stifled" (Skenazy 80); the "repetition of banal phrasings [that] suggest inarticulate and ill-defined feelings" (Jansen 396); dialogue containing "hesitations and reversals [that show] the narrator does not quite know what he wants or what he will do," leaving readers confounded (Haslam 63); and narrative language lacking "metaphoric depth" (Henning 690).

Perhaps, instead, these critics should honor Carver for his ability to communicate such voices containing "hesitations and reversals" or "banal phrasings"--voices all the more realistic (and interesting) because of these qualities. Other critics, of course, have been more appreciative of Carver's use of language.

Mark Schechner contends that "even at his most mechanistic, Carver could evoke something of the mysteries of existence through that precision of phrasing that makes dead things come to life" (42-43). Likewise, Peter Prescott, commenting on What We Talk About, praises Carver's style: "each [story] gives the impression that it could not have been written more forcefully, or with fewer words" (151-52). If a writer's medium is language, these comments are quite complimentary! While Carver's negative critics see his most minimal style as suggesting sketchiness (or superficiality), a nihilistic worldview, a tit-for-tat reportage (or even worse); his favorable critics often praise his style for its objectivity, its realism, its precision, its fairness, as well as its ability to powerfully register nuance and emotional register. If Carver himself came to write in a fuller style--one he called more "generous"--and if he rejected his most "minimalist" style, stories he wrote using this style are still, typically, finely crafted, and the language is evocative and suggestive.

Regarding Carver's sure execution of voice and precise use of language throughout his career, Schechner gives Carver praise I would also find appropriate about the language of his most minimalist period (for Schechner, the "most mechanistic" period):

> Carver's great source was a simple evocative Anglo-Saxon English that has at once a kind of Sprachgefuhl, the prose equivalent of perfect pitch in music, and an ocular honesty, a capacity for seeing clearly and the

> power to create, in prose, the illusion of a sharply visualized world. This is the work of a writer who cared about language because language was the thread that connected him most directly to life, which is why he strikes us as such a responsible mediator between his world and our own. (43)

Critical preferences vary--Carver's own aesthetic changed, as did his stories--and it is not my intention here to merely praise Carver's style during its most "minimalist" period, nor just to call into question negative criticism of that style, and point to critics who consider Carver a masterful stylist. Instead, I would make two related points. First, that Carver's style, during his most "minimal" period is appropriate for his thematic concerns. Second, that I do not agree with Gorra that the "anorexia" of Carver's written style matches the "spiritual poverty" of his characters' lives (155). The style is neither anorexic nor "flat"--and neither are the characters. Despite a style that backgrounds authorial presence, the quality of the language itself--precise, objective, and seemingly realistic--gives each story an authority that readers can accept and become engaged by.

Graham Clarke calls Carver "the quintessential minimalist" and argues in "Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence" that Carver reduces "to an absolute sparseness both his subject matter and his treatment of it," while he captures a "frozen moment," including the silence which is

incorporated into that moment (103). However, although Clarke credits Carver with glimpsing the unhappy "truth" about his characters' lives--that they are trapped, lonely figures in a chaotic and menacing society--Clarke also, unlike Gorra (and some other critics), credits Carver for giving his characters "moment[s] of recognition and insight," even if typically such moments involve the recognition of their own confinement and illusions (111). For Clarke, Carver's

> deceptive simplicity of style and often restrained and flat tones are part of a larger insistence on an absolute precision of attention: of the eye registering the minutest of details in order to sense the terms of another's existence. (105)

Clarke adds that this minimalist technique "is based upon an absolute concern with the implication of a single mood: a space of habitation (and consciousness) where the syntax is as much concerned with the silent as it is with the spoken" (105). For Clarke, then, Carver's characters are not just nonentities and "spiritually void": language that carefully describes how they are silent also gives them a measure of dignity.

This authority of description, perhaps, is also the result of Carver's own self-described process of writing. As Carver maintained, in various interviews, he wrote about experiences and characters he knew about, and although he maintained his stories were not autobiographical, they were based in the real world, if transcribed and inspired in the world of his imagination. They

also each began, according to Carver, not with any preconceived idea but with a sentence or an image. In an interview with John Alton in 1986, Carver explains how his stories begin to be written:

> **JA:** So when you write you don't think so much in terms of an ideal theme or conflict?
>
> **RC:** No, I never start with an idea. I always <u>see</u> something. I start with an image, a cigarette being put out in a jar of mustard, for instance, or the remains, the wreckage, of a dinner left on the table. Pop cans in the fireplace, that sort of thing. And a feeling goes with that. And that feeling seems to transport me back to that particular time and place, and the ambiance of the time. But it is the image, and the emotion that goes with that image--that's what's important. (154)

Much of the power--the vividness and emotionally charged mood--incorporated into even his most "minimalist" stories is expressed by both precise imagery and a typically low-keyed register of voice and narrative language. Combined, these two elements can engage readers both emotionally and intellectually. The emotional quality of "pop cans in the fireplace" is not heavily inflected by narrative; such concrete objects also provide an "objective correlative" to tonalities within stories. Complementing such objectified tonalities are semi-articulated, confused, and chaotic voices.

In "A Serious Talk", for example, the chaos and rending of a broken marriage are objectified by "some empty Shasta cola cans" in the fireplace; by a thrown upside-down pumpkin pie on the pavement from the previous six on the sideboard ("one for every ten times she had ever betrayed him"); by five flaming cartons of sawdust logs; by a turkey carcass "on a platter in the center of the dining-room table, the leathery remains in a bed of parsley as if in a horrible nest"; and in the backyard, by "a bicycle without a front wheel standing upside down" and "weeds growing along the redwood fence" (What 105-108). Chaos is also voiced by Burt's confused and angry resolution about having "a serious talk soon" and is just a part of his rambling and jumbled feelings: "There were things he wanted to say, grieving things, consoling things, things like that" (111). That Burt "forgets himself" in the process of trying to recover his relationship is evident by the chaotic domestic images, his angry and pointed and yet pointless speech, and by the counterpointing of his implied threats, moral confusion, verbal incapacity, and situational irony.

Rather than "anorexically" portraying anorexic or dispirited ("spiritually void") characters using minimal, muted language, Carver's "A Serious Talk" builds to a heated and dramatic conclusion, in which the reader distinguishes between Burt's own illusions about his future role as a husband reclaimed and forgiven, with the actual psychological meltdown he experiences as he backs away from his now completely estranged wife:

She came in. She said, "The phone went dead. Did you do anything to the telephone?" She looked at the phone and then picked it up from the counter.

"Son of a bitch!" she screamed. She screamed, "Out, out, where you belong!" She was shaking the phone at him.

"That's it! I'm going to get a restraining order, that's what I'm going to get!"

The phone made a ding when she banged it down on the counter.

"I'm going next door to call the police if you don't get out of here now!"

He picked up the ashtray. He held it by its edge. He posed with it like a man preparing to hurl the discus.

"Please," she said. "That's our ashtray."

He left through the patio door. He was not certain, but he thought he had proved something. He hoped he had made something clear. The thing was, they had to have a serious talk soon. There were things that needed talking about, important things that had to be discussed. They'd talk again. Maybe after the holidays were over and things got back to normal. He'd tell her the goddamn ashtray was a goddamn dish, for example.

He stepped around the pie in the driveway and got

> back into his car. He started the car and put it into reverse. It was hard managing until he put the ashtray down. (What 112-113)

Except for the last sentence, Carver's use of ordinary language and effective predication give each subsequent sentence a dramatic power as line-by-line each is a natural response of a character to a speech or action of the other, or it is the result of the character's own projected intention. The dramatic situation is not shut down but expansive, suggesting other consequences or other stories for readers. Critics of Carver's most "minimally" styled stories who emphasize their supposed static or indeterminate qualities, too often fail to accept or imagine the conflicts that are described there, and too often read such stories reductively. For example, Marc Chénetier exaggerates the indeterminacy in Carver's stories: "In all typological justice, Carver's stories should open and close with question marks, suspended as they are between untold causes and problematic developments" (176). Actually, the language used in "A Serious Talk" and other "minimally-styled" stories is clear enough to provide a sufficient dramatic context for the full rendering of one or more experience of human drama: short stories, by their limited size, are not suitable to convey a long series of experiences through time.

If, through their language, stories can illuminate a dramatic moment and continue to suggest point or significance for readers, they will have succeeded. Essential to this process, as

Charles E. May notes, is a story's artistic unity or pattern ("Reality" 377). Carver's most "minimal" style of language is worked together with informing objects--or images--and significantly dramatic speech and gesture. Together these elements work to develop dramatic action and, usually, in retrospection for readers, significant theme.

As noted earlier, Carver sometimes begins writing a story with a particular sentence. In "On Writing," he describes how a particular sentence was the impetus for a story's beginning ("Put Yourself in My Shoes"). He next tells how, together with this first sentence:

> There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion, or else, most often, there simply won't be a story. What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things. (26)

This working out of a story from specific suggestive imagery or from a specific suggestive sentence implies a sensibility that is both detail-oriented and imaginative, and one providing an articulation, as well, by contexts and nuances grounded by drama, of a "forward movement" in narrative: as Carver describes it, "a tension, a sense that something is

imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion." Of course, there may be little, if any, "forward motion" of principal characters in a story using a minimal style of language. But while it is true that What We Talk About When We Talk About Love contains few indications of characters who "move forward" affirmatively, this is not to say that the individual stories themselves do not provide dramatic movement for readers.

While some criticism about What We Talk About might be supportable--namely the number of stories that depict characters who fail to achieve a measure of happiness or success--the characters are not all alike (nor are the stories). Carver's most "minimal" style--with its keen attention to "the minutest details" of iconic imagery and sensitivity to silence--amazingly also manages to give each character a specific voice, and each voice tells a reader about the sensibilities of that character. In "Why Don't You Dance?" the girl's voice tells readers at least as much about her as about the subject of her story:

> "The guy was about middle-aged. All his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my God. Don't laugh. He played us these records. Look at this record player. The old guy gave it to us. And all these crappy records. Will you look at this shit?" (What 9-10)

In "Viewfinder" the salesman's patter and use of hooks for hands (which he blames on his family), underscores his initial

distance from the narrator:

> "Happens all the time," he said. "So they just up and left you, right? Now you take me, I work alone. So what do you say? You want the picture?" (What 13)

In "Gazebo," Holly's feelings of vulnerability are conveyed by her voice throughout the story in plain language:

> "It's true, Duane," she goes. "Just don't argue with me," she goes. (What 24)

In "The Bath," the baker's voice, in keeping with his otherworldly and detached character, sounds especially ominous over the telephone, especially for Scotty's father, whose son is in critical condition in a hospital:

> "Scotty," the voice said. "It is about Scotty," the voice said. "It has to do with Scotty, yes." (What 56)

In "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," Carver's ear for human voice detects an underlying tension in Mel and Terri's relationship, as well as the effects of alcohol upon the two couples:

> "What about the old couple?" I said.
>
> "Older but wiser," Terri said.
>
> Mel stared at her.
>
> Terri said, "Go on with your story, hon. I was only kidding. Then what happened?"
>
> "Terri, sometimes," Mel said.
>
> "Please, Mel," Terri said. "Don't always be so

serious, sweetie. Can't you take a joke?"

"Where's the joke?" Mel said. He held his glass and gazed steadily at his wife.

"What happened?" Laura said. (What 150)

Regarding characters' voices and their impact on others, Miriam M. Clark's commentary that "There is, significantly no discernible difference between men's speech and women's in most stories" (241) is clearly disprovable by reading those passages quoted above. Referring to Carver's ear for language, Adam Begley notes, "Carver's accuracy is the source of his impressive authority"(18), and one is surprised by how sharp his ear is for human speech, throughout his stories. Although I don't mean to suggest that What We Talk About is Carver's greatest achievement, critical readers such as Robert Houston have noted that despite the "stunning inarticulateness of many of the characters from this collection, their very "inarticulateness...makes them stunningly recognizable" and that the stories, like the individual characters, are "varied [and] surprising" (23-24). Reading the passages given above, one could hardly avoid noticing the different voices rendered.

Many of Carver's characters are sensitive to their own speech and to their lack of speech (both instances that help readers find story closure). For example, in "Neighbors", the Millers are fascinated by their absent neighbors and their access to their apartment. After finding some presumably sexy photographs, Arlene tells Bill that she "found some pictures."

And then she says, "'Maybe they won't come back,' and was at once astonished at her words" (What 15). What she finds astonishing is her new and semi-articulated language of desire. It is this language of desire, located throughout Carver's stories, that works to move characters from inarticulateness to greater communication and communion. When Arlene later adds, "Or maybe they'll come back and . . . " (16) and fails to finish her sentence, readers sense a psychological change in her. The next sentence reads: "They held hands for the short walk across the hall, and when he spoke she could barely hear his voice" (16). When they realize they have left the key inside and locked themselves out, the terror of the loss of physical access to this world of desire buffets them both. ("They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves" [16]). Carver's language carefully describes Arlene's quiet fascination for access to a seeming "forbidden" place. Her voice articulates both fear and desire. The specific moments of her internal conflicts are described precisely. My point here is that Carver's language attends to subliminal conflicts and desires below the surface of speech and this language of desire is attended to throughout his works. Because human desire--the realm of the libido--is difficult to articulate, instances of characters who are surprised by their own speech or voice serve as linguistic "clues," which can be compared with other nonverbal narrative to better understand a character and his or her experience. A character's

inarticulateness may give way to a questioned articulacy; likewise, an omission or premature closure of speech may be telling.

In "Why Don't You Dance?" the girl and boy engage in a similar tentative voyage of semiarticulated desire. After bouncing and kissing on the man's bed at night (placed outside, along with his other furniture and appliances), the "lights come on in houses up and down the street":

> "Wouldn't it be funny if," the girl said and grinned and didn't finish.
>
> The boy laughed, but for no good reason. For no good reason, he switched the reading lamp on.
>
> (What 5)

Reading "for no good reason" repeated, readers might question the motives of the boy and girl, especially in the verbal and iconic contexts presented: the furniture and all the man's possessions are outside but the house itself is dark. The suggestion of the man's death appears, perhaps, subliminally in the girl's "Wouldn't it be funny if" and her lack of sentence completion. The boy's laugh tends to confirm his understanding of her message--on a subliminal level. Looking again at Arlene's statements, readers might also sense the possibility "presented" to her subliminally, and which she also evades with "maybe"--the possibility of her and Bill lastingly having access to their neighbors' "forbidden" things.

The question of the boy's and the girl's motives in "Why

Don't You Dance?" is given new suspicion by a seemingly intrusive concern, as the man perceives it: "He looked at them as they sat at the table. In the lamplight, there was something about their faces. It was nice or it was nasty. There was no telling" (7-8). For these very short stories, no sentence is superfluous, but in order for readers to remain sufficiently engaged as readers of subliminal messages, linguistic "clues" must retain qualities of ambiguity or uncertainty. The stories cannot remain interesting if the clues are overpresented, for their power typically is "below the surface" of conscious awareness. Oftentimes, critics who complain of a Carver's story's ambiguity may miss such clues--or refuse to accept them.

As I read Carver's stories, it seems that he increasingly foregrounds the necessity of acknowledging human desire, while also describing how such desire may be acted upon for good or ill. Characters of Carver's are not wooden puppets, and readers can "identify" with them by a recognition of those forces generally working below the surface of their consciousness and by their choices, affirmations, and actions. Carver's moral universe is a Kantian one, it seems, although one in which a character's freedom to choose and to act upon desire are both moral prerequisites. As Arthur Bethea notes, "Carver is a wonderfully suggestive, subtle writer" and his dialogue can be "powerfully suggestive," gaining power by "the less overt ways that the writer delineates his themes" (115, 117). Verbal slips, omissions, hesitancies, and variety of voiced characters work

together with the informing objects (metonymic and metaphoric) to establish tone, point, and sensibility for readers. Also, using ambiguous phrases and words to question and imaginatively conceptualize a story's moral dimensions, Carver's language opens up possibilities for moral affirmation.

Michael Vander Weele focuses on the necessity of shared language and communication for Carver's characters. For him, their lack of realized desire results from their limited comprehension of their own desires and their lack of "an active, discoursed will," both of which often require listening to others who listen to them as well (113-114). In Carver's later work, especially, characters learn to listen to others and retain what they hear, and they begin to achieve some of their own most cherished desires. But even in his most minimal period, I would maintain, characters willingly listen to others or to themselves and recall or relate their own experiences, both verbally and nonverbally. Readers are thus required to listen to each of these characters more closely as well, attending to their desires and their need to obtain some measure of closure--both emotionally and intellectually.

In "Why Don't You Dance?" the girl finds the need to talk about the middle-aged man. The narrator of "Viewfinder" is prompted by the handless photographer to act out his desires and not be confined within his house: he acts out his pent-up desire for retribution by throwing rocks off his roof. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" is the best example in this

collection of shared, engaged dialogue. Not only does each character listen to the other; each has something to consider from the other. Despite the palpable fear elicited at the ending of this story, as Peter Prescott notes, "something significant about love in its several varieties has actually been revealed" (154). Each story is about one or more characters whom Carver dramatizes through his attention to how characters consider moving from stasis to action, and implicit in this movement is the discovery of desire within them.

Mark Facknitz comments that "the key precept of minimalism appears to be precisely that requirement that the work be stripped of judgment and invite nonjudgement: the minimalist work deletes any sign of the work's having any intention upon us" (132). Facknitz adds:

> If he is a minimalist, Carver is so in part because he scrupulously removes himself from any posture that might imply presence of a moralizing author. His characters, however, are universally the victims of the death of morality; they are haunted by the absence of spiritual value and live restless and terrified in a moral void. (132)

Clearly, many characters in Carver's stories behave selfishly, and many are menaced by other characters or by their society. However, the premise that Carver's most minimal style reflects a "death of morality" in society or that his characters are primarily "victims" is clearly false and misses the larger

point: Carver's stories invite not only judgment, but more importantly, reader engagement and participation. They do make implied moral statements, but by means of narrative. Clearly, Carver's language is about the character's inner lives--and he is careful in how he depicts their voices and sensibilities.

Almost no commentary has appeared to date regarding Carver's language about the human body. But such ongoing sensitivity as Carver's surely can be described as humanistic--neither nihilistic nor "coldly minimalistic" (detached and uncaring). Carver's writing can be sensuously suggestive, but more typically, his writing emphatically depicts primal fears that reflect threats to a nervous or vulnerable body. Much of Carver's language and imagery details, for example, falling, or drowning. People in apartments may look down threateningly (as in "Are You a Doctor?" or "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?").

The fear of darkness has to do with the lack of perception of one's body in space, fears of abandonment, or, at times perhaps, an evil presence. These fears are primal and, thus, palpable. Carver's language is often palpable (paradoxically, the opposite of what is connoted by the "minimalist" label). In "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the story begins with reference to Mel McGinnis as a cardiologist and concludes in darkness with Nick listening to "everyone's" heart beating (What 154). In "What's in Alaska?" Jack felt Helen "put her arm over his ribs and her fingers crept across his chest." Looking down the hall, he "thought he saw it again, a pair of small eyes. His

heart turned" (Will? 92-93). But not all encounters are so threatening. In "Are You a Doctor?" Arnold reassures himself by feeling "though the layers of clothes his beating heart" (Will? 40).

Throughout Carver's stories the threats of falling (or drowning) or having fallen are made palpable by careful and descriptive language. Some characters are also physically destabilized. In "Sixty Acres", Waite tries to steady himself but sees the floor "slant in his direction; it seemed to move" (Will? 76). In the "Student's Wife," the wife not only has a nightmare about being "cooped up in the back" of the boat, she fears "the water was going to come in over the sides" (Will? 124); looking up at the "terrible" rising sun, her eyes also become "fastened on the red winking light atop the radio tower atop the opposite hill," then going back to her bedroom, she sinks down on her knees, and prays in earnest: "God. God, will you help us, God?" (131).

In "Put Yourself in My Shoes" Myers exclaims "Oh, God" before slipping on the walk and falling on the frozen ground with "the dread certainty that the dog would go for his throat" (Will? 136). In the same story, Edgar Morgan describes how a former colleague suffered a concussion that sent the man to the hospital, [whose] condition was quite serious (141). Not to be outdone, Hilda Morgan relates to the Myers how Mrs. Attenborough, a woman from "Down Under" (note the "oblique" reference to death) "fell across our couch and died. Died. Right in our living

room" (148).

Numerous other stories describe the fear of falling, falling, lying helpless, or drowning, among them: "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets," "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" (with Ralph beaten up and "sprawling on the pavement"), "Gazebo," "Sacks," "The Bath," "Tell the Women We're Going," " So Much Water So Close to Home," "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off," "The Cabin," "A Small, Good Thing," and "Vitamins." In "Where I'm Calling From," not only does Tiny fall, he falls "over in his chair with a big clatter. He was on his back on the floor with his eyes closed, his heels drumming the linoleum" (Cathedral 128). Also, J. P. tells about his falling in an empty well as a child, suffering "all kinds of terror in that well" (130). Other stories include "The Train," "Fever," and "The Bridle," in which the drunk Holits falls violently on a concrete pool deck and is severely injured; and in "Intimacy" the narrator-writer goes to his knees in supplication and humility.

If Carver's persona does not intrude into his work, his language everywhere is sensitive to his characters and their "physical bodies." Also, sufficient descriptive detail--that which appeals to a person's bodily senses--is everywhere in a typical Carver story. For example, at the beginning of "Why Don't You Dance?" the author describes, in much detail, how his furniture and some other possessions are placed outside on the lawn and where they appear in relation to the other items. If Carver's writing can be called "minimal" during the period of

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, it must have less to do with his economic style than with one of the other kinds of minimalisms Barth describes: "minimalisms of unit, form, or scale." For in terms of a story's depth and the "material of a story" (as I will describe in more detail in Chapter 3), Carver's subject matter is also not minimal.

Carver's use of descriptive detail in the first paragraphs of the stories from What We Talk About quoted below is just another indication of why describing his writing style as "minimal" seems inappropriate. In "Why Don't You Dance?" the first paragraph is detailed and precise, and through objectification begins to tell us about the man's story:

> In the kitchen, he poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard. The mattress was stripped and the candy-striped sheets lay beside two pillows on the chiffonier. Except for that, things looked much the way they had in the bedroom--nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, nightstand and reading lamp on her side. (3)

Likewise, "The Bath" begins with sufficiently informing descriptive details, especially the foreshadowing of the name of Scotty, the boy who would not be enjoying his birthday cake:

> Saturday afternoon the mother drove to the bakery in the shopping center. After looking through a loose-leaf binder with photographs of cakes taped onto the pages, she ordered chocolate, the child's favorite.

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> The cake she chose was decorated with a spaceship and a launching pad under a sprinkling of white stars. The name SCOTTY would be iced on in green as if it were the name of the spaceship. (47)

Critics who find such writing, even in his most minimalist period, "sternly denotative, allowing no scope for metaphor or linguistic exuberance" (Towers 37), miss Carver's careful rendering of a character's sensibilities and voice (the best illustration of this may be found in "Why, Honey?," which as Ewing Campbell notes, is "highly mannered, producing an authenticity we simply do not question."["Raymond Carver" 70]). Also, the language in Carver's stories often contains metonymic and metaphoric clues, which communicate to readers, if not always to Carver's characters, many of Carver's thematic concerns. For Carver also uses language precisely in these thematic contexts, in which the power and authority of speech lead characters to specific behaviors (as will be seen in later chapters). To sum up then, Carver's use of language is holographic in its presentation of the illusion of a multidimensional world, and to describe its most "minimal" manifestation as "minimal" is clearly misleading. His style is much more comprehensive and evocative, so much so that this "minimalist" label simply cannot be applied to it much longer. Although many characters during this period fail to articulate their needs and desires or ideas and communicate with others, the author communicates their ideas and intentions to us, presenting them to us neither obliquely nor

sketchily, but as we might seem to others, that is, "recognizably human."

Chapter 3

NEOREALISM AND HYPERREALISM IN CARVER'S STORIES

If Raymond Carver's work is most typically described as being "minimalistic," the next most frequently used description of it is "neorealistic," although few critics or commentators provide any adequate description or definition of the term. In fact, "neorealism" as used in a literary context has a rather recent currency to describe a "new" realism that is notably distinguishable from so-called postmodern fiction--although many critics regard neorealist fiction as containing one or more features of a postmodern aesthetic, particularly in its demonstration of the limits of language. In any case, the use that some critics make of the term is (if not pejorative) often overstated, if "neorealism" is given to mean an updated form of realism and if Carver's stories are simply read as illustrations of a new realism, one which requires greater reader involvement, and, especially, to fill in gaps caused by omission or to make sense of the inherent limitations of language.

However, if one views neorealism as an intensification of realism, one that not only attends to the natural world and the social world, but one that also probes the subconscious minds of characters and includes elements of myth, metaphor, and metonymy of a symbolic character, all constituting elements found in the real world of human experience, then Carver can be regarded as

such a neorealist. However appropriate the stipulated use of such a term, it is important to explore how Carver's stories both adhere closely to the world of the "concrete, physical reality," while additionally evoking worlds of the subconscious, including the intrusion of dreamlike worlds within characters, and the palpable presence and expression of mythic phenomena.

So familiar in critical commentary is the use of the term "neorealism" to describe Carver's stories in a manner that focuses almost exclusively upon a world of reduced possibilities and predominantly physical presence, and one that disallows or questions his characters' imagination and creativity, or even individual freedom, that a full scale inquiry into his use of informing metaphor, myth, symbol, and metonymy and his use of expressionism has not been written to date. Although a handful of commentary regarding Carver's use of symbols, metonymy, and rhetoric is extant, the bulk of critical commentary focuses primarily on either Carver's concise or "detached" use of language or on his very down-to-earth--if not downtrodden--characters of the poor and so-called lower class and middle class; in other words, ordinary people who, in a society where wealth and power predominate, find themselves without success or even ambitions or aspirations. But this view is certainly incomplete: readers are engaged by Carver's stories not only because of his "blue collar" characters and their predicaments; readers are psychologically engaged by characters who seek more in their lives. Carver's stories almost always contain a subtext

that engages these concerns, and one that requires more investigation in this study and in other studies.

Two other descriptions of Carver's realism have gained currency besides "neorealism," each emphasizing what their commentators see as emphatic elements in Carver's plot, themes, and characters: hyperrealism and, broadly speaking, "Dirty Realism." While hyperrealism emphasizes the uncanniness of a photo-realistic presentation of characters that seem somehow, paradoxically, unreal; "Dirty Realism," as coined by Bill Buford in Granta's Dirty Realism anthology in 1983, emphasizes the "subculture" of much of the predominantly white lower class, what Nick Hornby refers to as "America's under-belly" (33). Buford calls works of "Dirty Realism":

> unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch daytime television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music . . . drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism. (4)

Although these two ways of reading Carver's "presented reality" are quite different, they both make sweeping generalizations, usually pejorative, about Carver's characters. If the characters are not nihilistic images of men and women, as these critics would maintain, they are still less than normal, and certainly less than desirable, characters. But these characters are such, according to their critics, precisely because Carver's "downside neorealism" describes them as they

actually exist within this culture. "Dirty Realist" critics contend that Carver faithfully depicts the behavior and lifestyle of these characters and that much of the value and attractiveness of such stories upon readers--presumably more enlightened--is how the stories accurately describe the spectacle and futility of these characters' lives.

David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips comment in the conclusion to their groundbreaking essay (for Carver studies) "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver" (1979), that "[r]eading Raymond Carver's stories is like peering into the windows of life through very powerful binoculars" (90). For many a reader, part of the interest in a Carver story is a reader's felt complicity with the author (and, often, one of more of his characters) in being a voyeur of other's "lives" (83).

However, as Boxer and Phillips also note, this voyeuristic activity is actually more complex--and it certainly is more so than critics such as Buford would formulate it. Readers are not simply fascinated by reading about, or by imagining, the sexual peccadilloes of Carver's characters: like the characters themselves, engaged readers may face implications of psychological dissociation. As Boxer and Phillips observe, "If the mirror is an emblem of Carverian dissociation, the window, appropriately, is a complementary symbol of voyeurism" (77). Readers of "Neighbors," for example, not only witness Bill Miller staring wonderingly into a bathroom mirror in his neighbors' (the

vacationing Stones') apartment; they also may allow themselves to imaginatively see through Miller's eyes, each seeing himself or herself, as well, in Stones' clothes--if only for a fleeting moment. My point here is that even regarding voyeuristic characters, Carver's focus is not just superficial, for even as the Millers imaginatively become different "people"--believe differently and become self-observant--so also are readers allowed to see more than benighted specters or "drifters." By exploring the minds and feelings of his characters, Carver's neorealistic method manages to describe them realistically--that is, as fully "human," and, as such, possessing a measure of dignity and intrinsic worth.

Furthermore, Carver allows his characters to explore the world, and alternate selves, in various ways, including imaginatively. Even in what Carver called "the dark side of Reagan's America," (Boddy 201) his characters struggle to move forward in pursuing worthy goals (among them survival), and they often succeed in their struggles. Because of their struggles, they do engage readers. Carver's neorealistic stories thus also present his characters in a moral universe, albeit in a difficult one.

As Graham Clarke observes in "Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence," Carver's stories, with their "spareness and marvellous economy" yield their characteristic "intensity," an intensity that is typically manifested by Carver's rendering of "his subjects in a frozen

moment of time," and bringing "to bear on that moment the entire weight of their histories and life" (sic) (103). And this kind of observation is not unique to Clarke. One of Carver's most frequently received favorable compliments attests to his ability to render scenes with clarity, sharpness, and resultant power. Clarke also develops this comparison of frozen moments in a story to a snapshot, which nevertheless can capture an image of life:

> Like the photograph of his father, his stories mine silence and otherness. They achieve a texture of nuance and shadow in which less is invariably more. A syntax of silence makes the glimpse the primary act of knowing and, ultimately, communication. (103)

According to Clarke, Carver's fidelity to iconic imagery and his secondary concern for aural imagery and dialogue give his works an intense objectification of the externally real world. Carver's perspective is also, according to Clarke, "democratic" in its detailing of all the images and things of this culture:

> The act of looking is made central. Indeed Carver's is very much a world of people looking <u>at</u> one another: through windows, door frames, across rooms and tables; always fixed in a wholly separate and distanced personal space and otherness. They exist amidst a society which surrounds them with a constant stream of images reflecting imagined lives and the myths of an idealized American materialism. We glimpse them caught within this culture of collages; a momentary

> realization of their histories as wholly displaced from the fictions of the culture in which they exist. (105)

Clarke's essay develops the point that Carver's stories accurately "capture" snapshots of this culture, but for Clarke and others, what these depictions of frozen moments represent is a declining culture, one in chaos, of which television is the appropriate manifestation, a medium that projects images of a "meaningless and confused" world to characters whose "life inside the house is often meaningless and frozen" (116). Television, according to Clarke, empties history of its meaning and significance--including the personal histories of those whose images are "televised": "History as a series of discrete and knowable events no longer exists. Rather, everything is viewed as if on T.V. ; figures and rooms are glimpsed as if on television screens, reduced to little more than surface effect" (117). For Clarke, Carver's stories also depict this "emptiness" of his characters' lives (117):

> As in Segal's work, Carver's stories achieve the extraordinary effect of characters frozen in a kind of pantomime. They stand, sit, or muse alone, fixed in chairs or glimpsed through doors and windows which give to their existence a deliberate and unknowable otherness. What the stories seek, like Segal's sculptures, is to render the terms of that condition with an intensity which borders on the poetic: a felt

> sense of pathos and loss. In this sense nothing, indeed, need happen in a Carver story. They are able to encapsulate a history, and a life, in the merest detail, gesture, or moment, a mise-en-scène of America in the last quarter of the twentieth century: individual states which resonate across the continent with the force of a moral picturing. (118)

Carver's power to project such images is apparent by such criticism, but Carver's limitations as an artist, according to Clarke, lie within his aesthetic, which is to describe a world that can be "apprehended" through sensory experience alone; (Clarke quotes from "Elephant" regarding Carver's approval of a Chekovian sensibility [100-101]). If all a culture seems to produce are unending series of images to a population frozen to new possibilities for growth and development, such stories that concern themselves so exclusively with reporting or describing such surface images must reflect this condition, and imply what Clarke sees as the fusion of presence and absence--by moments of "surreal otherness" generated by television, and a culture without community, communion, conversation, and the sound of human voices: what Clarke calls "a very particular kind of American loneliness" (116, 118).

Graham Clarke's analysis of Carver's work might be, perhaps, only moderately interesting if it were unique. But reading critical commentary by other European critics such as Chénetier, Fluck, Karlsson, and Versluys, one is forced to

concede that much of the commentary is also a commentary on U.S. culture by means of Carver's stories, and that much of the commentary is supportable. However, looking at Carver's stories as hyperrealistic accounts of American culture misses the point of the stories. Carver, also, acknowledged that his stories were not primarily social or cultural or political documents, and while he felt strongly about "right-wing politicians," for example, (Alton 158), he maintained that his focus was upon writing "good stories"; furthermore, almost all of his own commentary of his stories refers to his characters as representatives of individuals--not types. Even so, critical perspectives that find in Carver's stories social or cultural issues, do so, I believe, because these also help to constitute the stories. I would only maintain that those characters are not subsumed by them, and that Carver's stories do reveal a psychological depth as well as, at times, a cultural chaos.

"Hyperrealism" is the name Ann-Marie Karlsson uses in her essay "The Hyperrealistic Short Story: A Postmodern Twilight Zone" to describe Carver's method (among other authors) of presenting stories and describing the stories' contexts. Karlsson describes aspects of hyperrealistic fiction as found in these stories: (1) anti-realistic tendencies, (2) reticence, (3) immediacy, and (4) a surreal absence of action, plot, and ideas. Working together, such qualities give such "new American short fiction . . . the same dismantling quality as the hyperreal," and such fiction should be called "hyperrealistic fiction" (151).

Karlsson's commentary is intriguing; although, as with Clarke, this critic offers too few instances from Carver's stories to unqualifiedly support it (only one passage from Carver's stories is included). Even so, Carver's stories do, at times, present one or another of these aspects of hyperrealism.

Karlsson comments that such stories as Carver's are "representational" and Karlsson notes Frederick Barthelme's distinction between "established realism," which "was full of lies, falsifications of experience for the sake of drama" (26), and "representation," which Karlsson states, "stands for only one part of the system" (145). However, what "representational" fiction also "sometimes" recounts for Karlsson is "a sense of absence in characters, events and setting" (145). Such characters are "reticent." According to Karlsson,

> Painful memories from the Vietnam War, previous marriage disasters, failures in their personal and professional lives seem to loom in their minds, but never surface to a level of communication. These characters are surrounded by silences that tell us more about the absence that permeates their lives than any spoken word could ever communicate. (145)

Additionally, Karlsson finds these reticent, somewhat empty characters having lives that are "uneventful, trivial. . . .Most of the time, they just wait for something to happen, for a change they cannot realize or verbalize, only sense and anticipate" (146). Likewise, the omnipresence of "details, objects, and

brand-names does not deepen our knowledge or understanding of characters or plot" (147). "Indeed," for Karlsson, "the whole text seems enigmatic and reticent, withholding resolution, revelation and completion" (147). Although these stories may be "representational," it might be asked how much of "reality" do they represent? Apparently, and paradoxically, not enough, as Karlsson describes it. Readers of hyperrealistic stories (or texts) are destined to remain frustrated:

> What we expect to be communicated is left out, remains silent, and what we encounter is insufficient, incomplete, gives neither an opening nor a closure. The triviality of action helps to build up suspense, since we are awaiting a climax which will compensate for the uneventful development of the plot; we, like the characters, are awaiting the build-up or a break-down, which remains unexpressed and unknown. (147)

If readers are frustrated by a story's lack of sufficient action or closure, readers nevertheless keep attentive by a present tense that "dominate[s] these stories" (148). Together with a "brevity of form," these stories express a "sometimes disturbing sense of immanence or immediacy" (149). But, unfortunately (again) for readers, these short stories' "brevity of form" gives readers a "certain uneasiness" as they conclude abruptly, giving readers "a glimpse rather than a vision" (149).

Working together, such elements present a photo-realistic or hyperrealistic surface, but little else: "its meaning

tantalizingly evades the reader/spectator and the fiction and paintings become emotionally and intellectually disturbing" (151). Karlsson notes how the intense vision of reality achieved by exaggerated verisimilitude and emphasis on immediate experience might also suggest a "film-like quality of this fiction" in which "action is replace by stillness, communication by silence, and plot by perception" (150).

One wonders, after reading such commentary by Clarke and Karlsson, whether hyperrealism is an accurate description of the world(s) Carver presents in his stories. Both critics emphasize the surreal images presented in these stories and the "disturbing" slippage of fixed meaning or (cultural) significance as television images seem to acquire an equal status to images of characters, many of whom appear "frozen" or "still." While Karlsson's essay is more speculative--she offers different possibilities for the future of a literature "which is attempting to find new means of expression beyond traditional realism and postmodern fiction" (153)--both critics emphasize qualities they cite as missing in Carver's stories. While Karlsson points to a disturbing absence of significant characters, plots, and ideas, Clarke goes further in his characterization of what embodies these omissions:

> Death frames Carver's world and suggests an underlying nothingness: the existential terms of an America <u>sans</u> its transcendent possibilities. The overall mood is that of an America as a single, but empty and dark,

shopping mall. (100)

Again, Clarke appears to link Carver's stories--which for him exhibit a "pervasive" and "continuing fear and anxiety of death" for characters who lead "ostensibly failed lives"--with the actual American culture, which he seems to view as being the "informing context" (such as it can be said to exist) of these stories. Although Clarke insists "that there are other Americas besides Carver's" (120), both he and Karlsson seem to view such hyperrealistic short stories as dark and disturbingly "realistic," if somewhat surreal in their intense focus upon images--of all kinds--to the exclusion of other story elements, whose elements or subtexts seem to focus upon death, chaos, or "an underlying nothingness." But are Carver's stories really as nihilistic as described by these (and some other) critics?

Part of this critical perspective may be the result of the desire of such critics to "correct" the almost universal reputation of Carver as a realist. Carver's own commentary on the subject is enlightening, as is an objective investigation of those elements of realism or expressionism (including myth) present in the stories. In "An Interview With Raymond Carver" conducted by Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Carver dismisses his interest in a tit-for-tat realism:

> **RC:** Presumably my fiction is in the realistic tradition (as opposed to the really far-out side), but just telling it like it is bores me. It really does. People couldn't possibly read pages of description

> about the way people <u>really</u> talk, about what <u>really</u> happens in their lives. They'd just snore away, of course. If you look carefully at my stories, I don't think you'll find people talking the way people do in real life. (113)

If realism were a method of describing the real world of external reality to the exclusion of any suggestion of a character's "inner reality," Carver might maintain that writing hyperrealistic fiction--if it is simply photorealistic--would not be inappropriate. However, he asserts (above) that while his fiction is "in the realist tradition," it is not simply photo-realistic or yielding an accurate or exact copy of external reality. The hyperrealistic label might be more persuasive if it were to also fully describe a reality behind the surface presentation of reality. But this view of Carver's fiction, by its very narrowness of focus, seems unaware of what characters say, what they seek, and fails to recognize their inner "lives." However, criticism such as Clarke's and Karlsson's does point out indirectly ways in which such stories include elements of surrealism and how these have the potential to disturb even naive readers, less by their exactitude to external reality than by their engagement for readers by using " the very process by which he [a reader] experiences and imagines" (Opdahl 4). As Keith Opdahl observes, realists "can create the illusion of reality not just by literal detail and the conventions of realism, but by any other means that approximate the effect of reality" (4-5), which,

of course, include primal feelings and images that play upon the unconscious minds of characters and readers.

In his introduction to Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction, editor Kristiaan Versluys distinguishes between realism and postmodernistic fiction by noting realism's emphasis on life as [it is] felt" and upon human "experience" being accessible and informing "the realistic self" (7,8-9). But for Winfried Fluck it is how Carver's characters fail to learn from their experiences and fail to articulate their feelings that make his stories both neorealistic and seemingly hyperrealistic but not realistic. For Fluck, Carver's stories "provide brief, occasionally enigmatic and somewhat surreal descriptions of an isolated, decontextualized moment that nevertheless result in an effective illusion of reality" (69). However, while readers have easy access to Carver's fictional worlds, his characters, according to Fluck, act "rather helplessly and without orientation" and appear "confused, unstable, and disoriented" (70-71). Their experiences are devoid of any significant meaning, of any "potential to reveal existential truth" and provide no promise to readers of "deep knowledge" (71). Instead, such characters seem unable to benefit from their own experience or be "deeply affected by them, but continue to live on as before" (72).

Carver's characters, according to Fluck, "possess only weak identities and are therefore easily unsettled [and] any incident can initiate an unexpected turn of events" (72); as such, they

can provide his stories with only so much significance. What instead provides significance--or rather engagement--for readers is Carver's "illusionist realism" that "promises an authenticity and representativeness of experience that is, on the other hand, continuously undermined by the absence of semantic depth" (77). What remains is the

> recharging [of] the realistic surface of the text with a meaning that cannot be firmly grasped. As is the case with photo[-]realism, ordinary events thus assume the character of fascinating, semantically highly charged images, without suggesting . . . any representative value beyond themselves. Indeed, it may be argued that it is exactly because they both promise and subvert a claim for representative meaning that they remain effective as an aesthetic experience. (78)

Stories that foreground (in Fluck's words) "urban experience . . . as an authentic challenge to the self," the tone of which is "'cooler' and disengaged," establish for their readers a "surreal presence" (74). Fluck cites paintings by Edward Hopper (Nighthawks, 1942) and Richard Estes (Central Savings, 1975), which, like Carver's stories, also foreground external physical reality to the exclusion of human presence (74-77).

Reading Carver's stories as hyperrealistic narratives (or tableaux) is, I believe, too narrow, even though such readings

can be explained and somewhat supported. Put simply, Carver's stories do provide semantic depth. Fluck's primary assertion, that such stories describe a "reality defined as a sequence of decontextualized moments, [and] that [because of this] the ordinary and commonplace can no longer retain any symbolizing power" remains unproven in his essay. In fact, Fluck does not describe any story of Carver's, in any detail, to advance his reading.

The best description of Carver's style and thematic concerns may have been coined by William Stull: a "synthesis of simplicity and strangeness" ("Raymond Carver" 468). This description is both accurate and suggestive, and it helps to explain the depth and breadth of reader engagement in Carver's stories.

Reading Carver's stories as hyperrealistic texts does at least acknowledge qualities of strangeness in stories, such as surreal images and, sometimes, speechless, overwhelmed characters. However, the world of Carver's characters, while seeming strange and puzzling, is not inherently nihilistic--and, as readers, we can understand, if not always identify with their disorientation or dissociation of self. Although fictive, their speech, as Michael Vander Weele observes, is both strange and recognizable "as our own" (108).

Although Carver's stories may seem hyperrealistic, as Charles E. May observes, such stories also "take on an hallucinatory, dreamlike effect even when the events occur in the

wide-awake daylight of the everyday world" ("Reality" 373). Such stories, as May contends, can create "metaphorically meaningful reality by focusing on metonymic detail in a highly compressed, highly patterned form" (377), and describe fictive worlds and characters that transcend a narrower, nihilistic set of experiences and expectations--of both characters and readers. Many, if not most, critics agree about describing Carver's characters as potentially weak or unstable; however, this does not mean, nor should imply, that they are negligible or that their world is informed by an underlying nothingness. Other readings of Carver's neorealism seem to underscore this last point and allow for possibilities of themes potentially existing "below the surface" of narrative and giving informing images a promise of depth and significance while describing how such stories can be both recognizable and yet, in some ways, strange or compelling.

Carver's art, in accordance with the particular capability of the short story, as May observes, works to "defamiliarize our assumption that reality is simply the conceptual construct we take it to be, and throws into doubt that our propositional and categorical mode of perceiving can be applied to human beings as well as to objects" ("The Nature of Knowledge" 137). Carver's stories may include disturbing or defamiliarizing visions of what Boxer and Phillips describe as the "real unreal" (83). Reading Carver's stories as other than ordinary venues for a "realistic" world view is, it seems to me, a useful way of describing how

characters and readers are impelled to read such stories in depth. But reading Carver's stories as hyperrealistic fiction, even though such readings may be fascinating, fails to recognize those challenges to characters and presentations of themes that help to keep readers exploring these stories, stories that are neither closed nor restricted for readers, but are semiopen.

As mentioned above, in 1983 Bill Buford described Carver among other American writers (realists or neorealists) as "Dirty Realists." Although the label never gained the critical currency, for example, as "hyperrealist" did, the description and sensibility associated with this term are expressed in a significant number of critical commentaries about Carver's stories. For these critics, Carver's themes are necessarily limited because of his characters: they limit possibilities of larger, more significant, stories. Even so, in my reading of Carver, his greatest achievement in his stories is not his precise use of language, nor his depiction of scene, but rather his adroit presentation of individual characters. His realism is, I believe, based upon these characters, including their states, desires, sensibilities, imaginations, dreams, and willingness to act morally. Although such characters lack economic or educational opportunities, they still have recognizable aspirations and desires for a better quality of life, and most every one retains a measure of personhood, of a particular and individual characteristic, and a measure of unpredictability.

What makes them familiar to readers of Carver's stories are their difficulties in leading more successful lives; even though they wish for better lives, oftentimes such wishes, by themselves, offer no promise. Furthermore, Carver depicts a population and culture unlike others: people who rarely have enough money but who must constantly work all the small-paying jobs there are in this country, during a period of culture when the middle class began to erode, leaving a population of semi-affluent and affluent, a shrinking middle class, and a growing number of poor, including working-poor Americans.

During the period of Carver's individual short stories' being published, from 1963 to 1987, the American culture had not only witnessed a shrinking middle class; it had undergone social and political struggles and economic recessions, which together with changing sexual mores, including the widespread use of birth control and abortion, added increasing stresses upon families and individuals in this period. During this period, increased rates of violent crimes and other crimes were significant, as were higher rates of drug use, and an increase in suicides, unwanted pregnancies, and divorces. While Carver's stories do not address social issues as such, they are informed by these, and, I believe, Carver's treatment of two important (and related) themes helps to account for a good deal of their popularity: the real problems associated with a lifestyle of limited opportunities, in contrast to the myth of the "American Dream," and the loss of male identity or status and the consequent fragility of male and

female relationships. Labeling Carver as a "Dirty Realist" and describing his characters pejoratively really overlooks Carver's own contribution in addressing "real" concerns and struggles of his characters throughout this period of U.S. history. Problems that are deeply felt and psychologically challenging to a person's sense of self and place in his or her world provide significant thematic contexts to Carver's neorealistic stories.

Critical commentary regarding Carver's characters varies, but the majority of commentary describes his characters in much the same way as Buford does. Most describe them as inarticulate, uncomprehending, down on their luck, and without realizable prospects or ambitions; people drifting through life or escaping through alcohol, drugs, and a transient life-style. For these critics, they seem to lack strong wills, strong identities, and strong connections with others. Most seem a part of "a painful, collective captivity," yet, paradoxically, as Kirk Nesset observes in The Stories of Raymond Carver, they also typically "are dissociated from themselves, alienated from everybody and everything they know" (104, 27). Alan Davis describes them as "apolitical creations who participate, either as instigators or victims, in petty acts of betrayal and disillusionment" (653). Arthur Saltzman in Understanding Raymond Carver describes Carver's characters as "detached from others and their worlds: [unable] to commit themselves to anything: a dwelling, a career, an embrace," as "self-pitying," and as self-obsessed: "every Carver character, after all, is the hero of some tragedy so

supremely important that he cannot lend himself to another's" (61, 108, 139). Victoria Aarons adds that "they are so wrapped up in their own needs, neuroses, and self-deceptive lies that they miss each other's meanings or simply do not care about what other people have to say" (148). If these characters are in relationships, these seem tenuous and threatened. Between the threatening forces of an external, materialistic world and an internal, insecure emotional realm, individual characters proceed with caution at times, by following their own desires. Even so, despite their circumstances, some of Carver's characters do act successfully by articulating their desires and communicating with others. In Carver's later stories, characters increasingly articulate such desires, and increasingly gain some measure of personal growth and closure.

Raymond Carver's own critical commentary about his characters and the themes of his stories is relevant here. Although a critic such as Madison Bell might complain about a "dime-store determinism" present in Carver's stories, the kind that allows reader to be "drawn in not by identification but by a sort of enlightened, superior sympathy" (67), Carver maintains that his characters are "recognizably human," that they are representative of people from his own life. Regarding determinism in fiction, in Carver's essay "All My Relations," he commends fiction writing that champions characters who are "<u>going on</u>, sometimes against the odds, sometimes even prevailing against the odds" (140). In an interview with Nicholas O'Connell, Carver

makes the point about his fidelity to representing authentically, if fictionally, the lives of people like he had known, those who have had to struggle in their lives:

> **NOC:** I asked that question because in reading your stories I noticed that you seem to have a lot of compassion for the downtrodden.
>
> **RC:** I hope so, I hope that comes through, because I cast my lot with those people a long time ago. Those are the people I grew up with and know best, and they still seem to be a source of most of my imaginative interest. I haven't written much about people who haven't found it necessary to be tried in some way or another. I've been around academics off and on, and I've spent a lot of time on college campuses, but I've never once written anything about a college campus or about school. Never. That life simply never made a lasting emotional impression on me. I do know something about the life of the underclass and what it feels like, by virtue of having lived it myself for so long. I do feel more kinship, even today, with those people. They're my people. They're my relatives, they're the people I grew up with. Half my family is still living like this. They still don't know how they're going to make it through the next month or two. Believe it or not, but it's true. (137-138)

In John Alton's interview with Raymond Carver, the author

further describes the tone of his stories and comments upon their subject matter and, indirectly, about the value his characters have for him:

> **JA:** If you had to name your tone, what name would you assign to it?
>
> **RC:** I think my stories often have to do with loss, and as a result the tone is, well, not somber, but severe. Grave, maybe, and somewhat dark--especially the early stories. But the story I read last night ("Whoever Was Using This Bed") had a dark side to it. I suppose generally the tone is grave. But life is a serious business, isn't it? It's grave, life is, tempered with humor.
>
> **JA:** It seems to me that there is a tremendous sympathy on your part for the characters.
>
> **RC:** I hope so. I feel there is, at any rate. In all the books so far, I could never have been condescending to those characters and felt myself any sort of writer at all. I have to care for the people in the stories. These are my people. I can't offend them, and I wouldn't. (156)

In a 1987 interview with Kasia Boddy ("A Conversation"), one of his last, Carver specifies the themes (he calls them "obsessions") of his stories:

> **RC:** There are certain obsessions that I have and try to give voice to: the relationships between men and

> women, why we oftentimes lose the things we put the most value on, the mismanagement of our own inner resources. I'm also interested in survival, what people can do to raise themselves up when they've been laid low. (199)

Reading portions of the interviews cited above, along with others collected in Conversations With Raymond Carver (eds. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, 1990), it is easy to get a clear and consistent view of Carver's tone toward his characters, whom he often refers to as "people," and his attitude towards his craft: respectful and responsible. Such respect is also given to his thematic concerns: the struggle of people without economic security, how they survive, their struggling relationships, and how they manage to endure and sometimes "move forward" in their lives.

Along with this, as Carver notes in Alton's interview and in Boddy's interview, is the presence of "some humor in the stories" (199). In fact, this is a point close to Carver's aesthetic, a sensibility that Carver's most negative critics of his so-called minimalist style or hyperrealistic (or "Dirty Realistic") stories, miss. In a 1983 interview, Kay Bonetti observes:

> **KB:** Nobody talks about the humor in your stories.
> **RC:** I'm glad you brought it up, because I feel there is plenty of humor in them. There was a good long review of Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? in

> Newsweek when the book first appeared and the reviewer did talk about the humor in the stories and I was very glad to see that, because I think that there is humor in the stories--a little black humor maybe, but humor. (58)

In fact, most of Carver's stories may seem less grave than humorously imaginative, for both characters and readers. (Carver's emphasis of his own serious concern for his characters, while not exactly overstated, may be declaimed with a deference to people he grew up with.) A few commentators have recognized the humor, though sometimes grotesque, in many of Carver's stories. Carver's humor is a part of his sensibility as a writer who is not programmed: he freely varies his tone or combines moods and tonalities to give readers a greater perspective upon stories in which the "reality" of experience is equally internal as external. In other words, in almost all of Carver's stories, his thematic focus explores a character's feelings, emotions, and psychological perspectives. Again, his stories are not "about" external reality in a superficially presented manner; rather, Carver uses actions and events in stories to allow characters to explore or act out their own feelings and desires, even as he sometimes holds them up to humorous portraiture.

Many of Carver's stories have humor as an important element. Others contain dark humor or tragicomic humor. Others contain elements of a debunking humor, and together these elements help to give characters credibility and provide more

interest and engagement for readers. Reading audiences can identify with characters and empathize with them; and laugh, as well, at or with them in their situations and conflicts. David Carpenter recounts how an audience attending the author's reading of "Whoever Was Using This Bed" (a story as Carver notes with a "dark side") responded to it: "The audience here goes from rib-aching hysteria to rapt attention as the narrator and his wife talk in bed at five or six in the morning about whether one would unplug the other from a life-support system if s/he were suffering unduly" (29).

Laurence Perrine's observation of the value of fiction to give readers "felt insights" (256) is appropriate here. Readers are actively engaged by characters' humorous exchanges and also closely attend to other qualities of their lives presented. The "truths" presented in Carver's stories (as with others), as Perrine notes, "take a deeper hold on our minds because they are conveyed through our feelings" (256). To miss Carver's humor, then, is to miss a sensibility that helps to explain his characters' lives and their thematic significance; and if Carver is a neorealist, he is so because his stories are emotionally complex, exploring several sensibilities or realities of human experience.

In "Elephant," arguably one of Carver's best stories, Carver details the range and depth of the narrator/protagonist's predicament in trying to support, both financially and emotionally, his shiftless relatives, all of whom feel themselves

to be victims. The father's circumstance is amazingly funny, and the protestations his relatives make are both somewhat strange and familiar. For example, in his son's letter, his son demands that he send money because "his life hung in the balance" (Where 485). He claims he desperately needs to "go back to Germany" because "people over here, in the U.S., couldn't hold a conversation unless money figured in it some way, and he was sick of it" (485). Psychological tension builds in the mind of the father until he realizes that his own escape fantasy, to move to Australia, is just that, and that he is really grateful for his extended, but dispersed, family. When the external world presses so dramatically upon him, he escapes, instead, to a dream of his childhood and how he rode upon his father's back like a man riding an elephant. Such a happy and deeply resonant image from childhood's memory is contrasted by his second dream--a nightmare of himself drunk and smashing through the glass of his son's car. After waking up in shock, and drinking coffee in his kitchen, he recognizes his deep emotional bonds to these somewhat bizarre but treasured family members. When he realizes that he will never follow through with his threat to move to Australia, he laughs and releases his fears and anxieties and "[begins] to feel better" (487). In the remainder of the story, his resentment is replaced by well-wishing and gratitude. What transforms him is a recognition of goodness within him and happiness in the joy and realization of belonging in some sense, to a family, which helps him to become better integrated psychologically (as both child

and father, and as a member of the human family). Carver uses humor and pathos together affirmatively here. Equally important is the role dreams play upon a character's subconscious, in this case to act cathartically: humor is an important element in this psychological recognition of self, and in this process of healing and affirmation.

In other stories, Carver's humor allows for readers' appreciation of characters who act or imagine humorously, and readers are engaged by characters who are remarkably imaginative. If characters' desires or ideas are not always articulated or expressed in action, they often appear as dreams or reveries. For example, in "Whoever Was Using This Bed," Iris blushes when asked, "Who is this Earl you were talking about in your sleep?" (Where 429). In "What's in Alaska?" one of the couples who get "stoned" by smoking marijuana imagine what they might do in Alaska if they move there--grow giant cabbages or pumpkins (Where 77) or have their pet cat go hunting (81)--but their suggestibility under the influence of marijuana and disconnected, yet freewheeling, speech give this story both a humorous and, in hindsight, perhaps, a serious and more poignant cast. Carver indirectly describes a character's imagination, to cite just one example of this, when "Jack sipped the cream soda and watched the bubbles in his pipe. They reminded him of bubbles rising from a diving helmet. He imagined a lagoon and schools of remarkable fish" (75). What is poignant about such a character is both his lively imagination and his rather humdrum life juxtaposed in this

story. But still, even here, Carver displays his character's resilience, and the value of his desire and imagination to help to shape his life, at least as surely as his marijuana usage.

The imagined desires and reveries of Carver's characters are often humorous for readers, if not for the characters. In "Fat" the narrator imagines herself during sexual intercourse as "terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (Will? 8). In "The Idea," Vern and the narrator, after voyeuristically peering at their neighbors, get "jumpy" and engage in an orgy of food and cigarettes. (Their "snack," as the narrator describes it, consists of the following: bread and lunchmeat . . . a can of soup . . . crackers and peanut butter, cold meat loaf, pickles, olives, potato chips . . . corn flakes with brown sugar [and] apple pie with melted cheese" [Will? 20].) Now the narrator's imagination transforms her perceptions and sensibilities, and helps to describe her humorous state of mind:

> I watched for a while, but it was a talk show and I don't like talk shows. I started thinking about the ants again.
>
> Pretty soon I imagined them all over the house. I wondered if I should wake Vern and tell him I was having a bad dream. Instead, I got up and went for the can of spray, I looked under the sink again. But there was no ants left. I turned on every light in the house until I had the house blazing. (21)

In "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" the nosy mail

carrier, who is obsessed about discovering anything he can about a new couple who move into his area, describes Sally Wilson as someone who "has been snooping and prying for years under cover of the Welcome Wagon" (Will? 116). Another story, "Put Yourself In My Shoes" is, perhaps Carver's most humorous story; although, for some critics, Myers seems cruel or cynical, even though his only social failing may be his inability to stop laughing or giggling. The Morgans are such brilliantly rendered "respectable" characters that they defy description, although most readers would clearly distinguish Mrs. Morgan's courtesy--even if she is somewhat silly--from Mr. Morgan's boorishness and rudeness. Significantly for this comic story, they each try to give Myers (the implied narrator) suggestions to free up his writer's block, only to become the subject of his story themselves--the reader is told at the end of "Put Yourself in My Shoes" that "he was at the very end of a story" (Will? 152) --a rare instance, seemingly, of Carver employing a postmodernist technique. "Signals" is another humorous story of Carver's; although he failed to include it in Where I'm Calling From, together with "The Idea," "Are You a Doctor?" "After the Denim," "The Bridle," "Viewfinder," "The Compartment," and "Night School," all are excellent stories. As a story of manners, "Signals" is unsurpassed in portraying a palpable need on the part of many couples to be in the presence of persons tinged with celebrity: Aldo, according to Caroline, "used to be mâitre d' at the Copacabana in Rio. He knew Frank Sinatra and Lana Turner was

a good friend of his" (Will? 219). At dinner's close, when Aldo takes "Caroline's waiting hand," draws his "heels smartly together," kisses her wrist, gives her a long-stemmed rose, and asks about her enjoyment of her dinner, Wayne is taken aback (Wayne "looked away, [and] turned slightly but significantly as Aldo neared him" [226]). After complaining throughout his dinner about the menu, his seating, the service, the utensils, the staff's reputation, Wayne retorts that he does not think Aldo ever knew Lana Turner (226). The story, as others, is rendered in a light and humorous tone, and thereby ably conveys such social "truths" or "felt insights" by engaging a reader's feelings, and uses humor to do so.

Of course, Carver's characters are highly imaginative and suggestible, although not all of them are pleasant. In "They're Not Your Husband," Earl Ober's overhearing comments about his wife, a waitress, from customers in a diner who see her bottom as she scoops ice cream is more than he can stand. The image of her pink girdle against "thighs that were rumpled and gray and a little hairy, and veins that spread in a berserk display" is disturbing, especially after she begins shaking a can of whipped cream: he leaves his food and heads for the door, his manhood under question (Will? 23). In "The Father," when Alice contends that "Daddy doesn't look like anybody!" the father also experiences a psychological shock that touches his sense of self. This brief story concludes: "He had turned around in his chair and his face was white and without expression" (Will? 42).

Carver uses dreams, reveries, and shocking images or phrases to defamiliarize his highly imaginative characters. Some revert to daydreaming as a means of wish fulfillment, as does the young narrator of "Nobody Said Anything." After catching a ride from a woman who drops him off at the crossroads, the boy imagines what he should have done:

> What I should have done to start things off was ask if we could have lunch together. No one was home at my house. Suddenly we are under the covers. She asks me if she can keep her sweater on and I say it's okay with me. She keeps her pants on too. That's all right, I say. I don't mind. (Will? 49)

Sexual fantasy mixed together with realities in the boy's experiences inform this story of seeming conquest, of his "trophy"--the top half of a very skinny gray steelhead--so that when he shows it to his parents, he is more deeply shocked than they are by their hostile injunctions to remove it from their house. But after he goes outside with it, he stares at this natural wonder, still with awe and, one infers, with greater self-respect:

> I went back outside. I looked into the creel. What was there looked silver under the porch light. What was there filled the creel. I lifted him out. I held him. I held that half of him. (Where 61)

Carver's stories also describe imaginative characters who themselves explore or fantasize their desires and do obtain some

closure of experience because of them, in varying degrees. What is significant in this story, as with many others, is the boy's need to repeat and relive or reexplore fantasies in order to develop as a more mature character. In "Nobody Said Anything" the boy, unlike his brother George, is wanting to keep his parents together, and this is one explanation for his need to acquire a trophy. He is also desperate to prove his manhood and grow into a male adult, one who can capture both big, lively fish and fantastic, needy women. Spellbound, he reads the Princess of Mars for the fifth time and is fascinated by Tar's Tarkas and the green woman he "falls for." He is also fascinated by Vaseline petroleum jelly and its uncertain role as a sexual aid. He masturbates while smoking and watching a television show, and again while outdoors. While fishing and smoking, he again imagines his life with "the woman" and fantasizes French-kissing her on her couch with her shaking in ecstasy (51). Unable to capture her in the real world, he asserts himself by capturing two fish. Carver's first-person narrative allows readers to imagine the boy's psyche and to see how he views the world--not just a physically real world, but one infused by fantasy, desire, and wondrous Nature. Characters who reexplore this complex world are able to develop and mature; at least, this seems to be a truth about several stories.

As Ewing Campbell notes in Raymond Carver: A Study of His Short Fiction,

> The blurred lines between the imagined other and the

> self, actually the merging of the two, become resources for Carver's characters, ways of imposing structure on their experiences, and finally hints of a vaguely altered future. (12)

Although, more typically, characters compare themselves imaginatively to others, some may project images of themselves and their possibilities to make these imaginary comparisons. In "Are You a Doctor?" for example, Arnold Breit's imagination is known to be strong and suggestible, even though his own life has remained quiet and nondescript--until he receives a phone call from a stranger, Clara Holt. What transpires in the story is that Arnold grows as a character largely because of his newfound willingness to explore new possibilities for emotional contact: in this case, by the introduction of her voice over the telephone. As the narrator notes, "He knew he should hang up now, but it was good to hear a voice, even his own, in the quiet room" (Will? 32). He excuses himself briefly and looks at himself in the mirror over the fireplace and returns to the phone "half afraid she might be off the line" (33). After he agrees to meet her, just "to talk," he struggles upstairs to her apartment with a pain in his side, and imagines having a heart attack, his legs folding, and falling downstairs (35). When Clara earlier asked for his name and called him by name, he had felt threatened and when he meets her shaking her head "strangely from side to side," he immediately regrets his journey. Even so, before he leaves, he acts in a manner previously out of character for him:

"Appalled at himself, knowing he would despise himself for it, he stood and put his arms clumsily around her waist" (39).

Clara, the focus of Breit's attraction, is certainly unsettling in her appearance and disjunctive in her speech: "Her eyes were a pale green, set deep in her pale face and surrounded by what he had at first thought was dark makeup" (39). Although they hardly talk at all, she adds, before staring past him, "We had a good talk. I'm very glad you came, and I feel certain you'll come again" (40). Despite, or, perhaps, because of her strange manner, her appealing voice, and rather grotesque appearance, Arnold Breit is aroused to kiss her. When he later feels his beating heart and listens consideringly to his wife's voice over the telephone, we see how he has become more like a doctor, like someone who listens to and cares about others, a much different character than the abrupt and insulated figure at the story's beginning. In "Are You a Doctor?" readers know that Arnold's imagination is projective, that when he looked at himself in a mirror and "discovered" a hat, he made his decision to meet Clara (35). Readers know that he imagines something ominous about a large man in a sweatshirt looking down at him from an apartment balcony, and he seems struck by the "nonappearance" of Clara's son (who is presumably watching television in another room). In short, there are elements of gothic horror or the grotesque as Arnold Breit experiences his "night out."

However, because of his willingness to act on his feelings,

his emotions and unconscious mind have been stirred, and the Arnold Breit at the close of the story (one that is somewhat mysterious in its surreality of character) has acquired a more complex character. Even so, while readers may come to better understand how this occurs, Carver's story retains enough mystery (much is suggested but not explained) to make it semiopen for readers.

In distinguishing Carver as a neorealist, as contrasted with a traditional realist, Fluck claims that characters in Carver's stories do not benefit from their experiences; that although characters in realists texts can gain knowledge about themselves and their world, characters in Carver's stories move about the world "rather helplessly and without orientation. . . .Carver's characters appear to be not so much emotionally hurt as confused, unstable, and disoriented" (70-71). He adds:

> In Carver's work, crises and catastrophes are not heroic moments valued for their potential to reveal an existential truth but accidental occurrences in a dehierarchized sequence of daily events. Consequently, the characters that experience them are not transformed or deeply affected by them but continue to live on as before. It would appear beside the point to use words like authentic in this context, because experience has no redeeming force of initiation or transformative potential for the weak identities of Carver's characters. (71-72)

Although Fluck's reading is not unique, it seems to me to be shortsighted. This critical perspective fails to adequately look at the characters' inner lives and acknowledge those successful affirmations of individuals--even transformations--that do represent a significant portion of Carver's work. Fluck fails to appreciate the highly imaginative nature of Carver's characters, their suggestibility, and the stresses upon them, including building stronger identities and relationships in a context of poverty, job insecurity, alcoholism and drug use, and changing sexual mores. What is surprising is the number of Carver's stories that end with affirmation or character transformation, including many of Carver's best stories ("Will You Please Be Quiet Please?" "Put Yourself in My Shoes," "Nobody Said Anything," "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets," "Are You a Doctor?" "Fat," "The Calm," "A Small, Good Thing," "Elephant," "Viewfinder," "Where I'm Calling From," "Fever," "Menudo," "Cathedral," "Whoever Was Using This Bed," "Intimacy," and "Errand"). Many more stories, which do not end as happily, also demonstrate the power of characters' imaginations and desires to transform their lives.

Equally important is that characters in these stories are constantly involved in existential struggles and emotional conflict. "Elephant," "Nobody Said Anything," and "Are You a Doctor?" are just three illustrative stories in which characters are struggling towards a more complex and mature identity--and against their past or present circumstances. In each story the

psychological stresses upon the protagonists are different, and their victories over these forces are different, but each obtains some affirmation and greater freedom to act in the future. Although they may never become free from future "confusion," they do learn some things from their experiences. Even though Carver does not explicate the exact lessons learned--for many are implied by a narrative free of exposition--the subtexts of the stories, what occurs "below the surface," as Carver describes it, typically occurs first in the subconscious minds of characters (within the world of their desires, dreams, and imagination). Certainly Carver's characters do not always succeed in their struggles and realize their desires, and they may regret their actions--but they are not merely confused.

Although some characters remain withdrawn, others within the same story do act and behave authentically and sincerely in order to escape such isolation or withdrawal from life. Although some characters may seem "frozen," the majority are not, but instead seek more for themselves in their lives. Despite their defeats and failings, they remain, as Carver asserts, "survivors. They're not so downtrodden or whipped-out as one might think at first glance. What I want is a feeling of authenticity and of things being 'at stake' or 'at risk'" (Applefield 207). In other words, what characterizes their human condition, for Carver and his sympathetic readers, has more to do with their inner lives than their outer circumstances, as stressful as these may be. Carver's realism attends to the economic conditions of his

characters and to their social privations, but that is not his focus; rather it is upon his characters, their sense of themselves, their feelings towards those around them, and their emotional and imaginative worlds.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Carver's most negative critics see his work as either slight or superficial (sometimes banal) or nihilistic. One can understand these criticisms if his stories' themes were minimal, if the characters were slight, and if the language were minimal. I have described how Carver's language is suggestive, and how careful and close and questioning readers are able to locate nonapparent clues and read silences to help to better understand the implications of these stories. In this chapter, I've looked at and discussed two readings of Carver's stories--as hyperrealistic or "Dirty Realistic"--to emphasize how important attending to his characters' desires and imaginations and inner lives is.

But now, looking one last time at the charge of what might be lacking in Carver's neorealism may help to clarify somewhat more expansively how such stories retain a semi-open--rather than a closed (in this context, a nihilistic)--character. As noted earlier, criticism of Carver's style often shifts to criticism of his characters and to the stories' themes. If Carver's stories are viewed as mimetic--or photo-realistic--the charge is made that they merely transcribe or magnify an underlying nihilism in American culture, the kind of charge made by Winfried Fluck, John Aldridge, Mark Schechner, and Graham Clarke, among others. But

other critics contend that Carver's neorealism is definable by a minimal language of omissions, which at its best, involves readers who must imaginatively supply missing elements; but which, at its worst, results in stories that lack significant conflict, drama, characterizations, themes, and endings.

In my view, the central problem or misreading here is a critical insistence upon a given narrative text to provide a reductive linguistic "meaning"--to the virtual exclusion of recognizing characters' feelings, sensibilities, emotions, imaginations, and values, all of which relate to their own sense of their worlds. Readers who insist that all there is to these characters' lives are their external circumstances, their drab jobs, and troubled relationships, fail to adequately describe their stories, or even their situations in any particular scene.

For example, Michael Trussler (in "The Narrowed Voice: Minimalism and Raymond Carver") complains that although Carver's stories are not "hermetically sealed to the reader" (28), their insistence upon the present and immediate surface or exterior of events together with a language of omission (indeterminacy), which thereby foregrounds enigma or ambiguity, precludes any clear reading of his stories. Trussler contends that Carver's insistent use of a "limited temporal horizon" (26), together with the short story's proclivity of form to do the same, work to question a story's narrative in the first instance. He then notes that Carver's own expressed theory of omission, which the author followed most apparently in What We Talk About When We

Talk About Love, also tends to increase the problematicity of the texts in terms of apparent meaning.

Trussler cites Mark Chénetier's essay "Living On/Off the Reserve," explaining that such insistence upon particularities of individual words provided with indeterminate omissions tends not only to foreground a surface insistence or surface reading, but also conceals another reading, or as Chénetier puts it, "surface": "surfaces have two sides . . . [and] the one we see is not the one that matters" (qtd. in Trussler 27). Trussler also cites a portion of Wolfgang Iser's theory of textual "gaps" that provide readers with "a kind of unformulated double" (The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response qtd. in Trussler 28). Trussler then asserts that:

> A reader, facing the "formulations" of a Carver text, is beset by the text's "unformulated double"; hermeneutic difficulty arises from the reader's inability to ascertain the identity of this doubled text, this "negativity," a situation that results in considerable uncertainty. Indeed, part of Carver's stratagem is to employ seemingly realistic narrative precisely for the purpose of undermining an epistemology that would maintain that the external world can be comprehended. (28)

Trussler, in support of his reading, points to Carver's "Why Don't You Dance?" as a confirmation of his interpretation of the impossibility of Carver's text to make clear the story's

theme--and even with respect to the girl's own narrative, to explain or satisfy a reader's explanation of a narrative that suggests more of an evolving tableau than a true story. Not coincidentally, Chétenier and Fluck also make similar points about "Why Don't You Dance?"--clearly Carver's most enigmatic story. As Trussler observes:

> By accentuating the enigmatic nature of the events, the embedded narrative associated with the young woman ("she kept talking") temporarily encourages the reader to forego interpretation. In this way, Carver initially manipulates the reader into a relationship of complicity with the young woman, thus effectively, as Chénetier writes, "shutting the story down" [179]. However, the embedded narrative (offering an internally collapsing interpretation of the events in the story) implicitly expands the perimeters of the narration to include the reader's necessary but paradoxical involvement. The reader may wish to emend the young woman's rendition of the events ("we got real pissed and danced") but, when it comes to interpreting the significance of the events, the reader's position is not substantially different from the young woman's. Faced with the text's negativity--a narration that is hollowed out by silence, a narrator who is often mute about causation and reticent regarding detail--the reader's attempts at

interpretation must necessarily be provisional. (30)

Mark Chénetier goes further than Trussler in maintaining that Carver's work embodies indeterminacy, and that reading his works yields "a collage-like quality of an apprehension of the real, [with readers] unable to rely on the analytic and organizing powers of consciousness" (174). In fact, Chénetier also insists that Carver's "insistent use of interrogations, interrogative structures, and indefinite centers" complements the indeterminate nature of his stories (178).

In response to these criticisms, I should first acknowledge how my own reading of Carver's works benefits from a study of short story theory (genre criticism of the short story), especially by works of May, Lohafer, Rohrberger, and Wright. For although they each read a story's significance and formal elements somewhat differently, they each insist--as do other short story theorists--that stories are to be read differently than novels and other works of fiction or prose. (Chapter 4 will describe their critical perspectives more fully.)

In answering Trussler's criticisms of Carver's stories, some points should be first noted. First, Iser's theory of a text's "negativity" and "unformulated double" is both thoughtfully suggestive and speculative. Stories, I maintain, are not simply "literary texts," but even if they were, Carver's stories are no different than stories by other writers because as literary works of art or "literary texts" (Iser's usage), they each have "negations" and "deformations," and each requires readers to read

and interpret them closely but imaginatively: they do not represent external reality "literally" (Iser 228). And, as Iser notes, "The world of the [literary] text usually appears in a state of alienation, and this alienation effect indicates that meaning is potentially there, awaiting redemption from its potentiality" (228-229). Finally, for my purpose here, Iser adds:

> Communication would be unnecessary if that which is to be communicated were not to some extent unfamiliar. Thus fiction may be defined as a form of communication, since it brings into the world something which is not already there. (229)

Trying to interpret Carver's stories requires, then, more than attending to their language on a literal or reductively simplistic level--nor are short stories primarily expository--and this form of fictive communication also requires attending to more than brilliantly realized surface features or values. It is not that Carver's words in his "texts" lack coherence, but that they don't embody, alone, the significance and meaning of his stories. Put another way, although his stories should be read closely, his stories are not just a construct of words; he employs them to describe characters and their fictive actions and internal lives, and equally importantly, to engage readers both during and after each reading, both emotionally and intellectually. An important key to successfully reading Carver's stories is imagining the minds and sensibilities of his

characters, and, as short story theorists have expressed it, attending to their dreams and desires, and later working through themes and ideas they present. Although many of Carver's characters may seem inarticulate, they actually seek to find explanations for their actions or feelings, or for those of others.

But readers of Carver's stories can learn more than characters can about their lives. For example, a close reading of "Why Don't You Dance?" reveals an important theme of Carver's not generally commented on but closely adhering to much of the story's language: the loss of manhood male characters face and their trouble finding an appropriate role in contemporary American society, which (together with the other "menaces" of identity loss: loss of close relationships between men and women or troubles with these relationships, and problems--both physical and psychological--inherent in living in precarious economic straits) appear again and again as themes in Carver's stories.

Che'netier does pinpoint Carver's overarching thematic concern in one sense, however, with his assertion that "identity is process and this process is what Carver's stories trigger, from crises to crises" (167). But Carver's characters do reveal themselves to readers in Carver's stories, and Carver's stories' language is not as exclusively or insistently phatic as Che'netier construes it ("it hardly gives it any dynamism or sense of direction" [171]). Instead, considering Carver's use of interrogativity, readers might ask: Does Carver provide answers

to questions he raises in titles and in other places in his stories from his characters' voices? And I would answer, "Yes."

Carver's use of language is rigorous and (quoting Bethea once again) "wonderfully suggestive" and "subtle" (115). But while readers should closely attend to the language in his stories, they should also attend closely to his characters, their speech, behavior, gestures, and with other "clues" in his stories, work to understand them. John Aldridge's commentary of Carver's characters, which stresses their unknowability--"they tend to be seen from the outside, not created from within, which is to say that they are not brought imaginatively to life but remain comatose figures" (41)--can clearly be disproven by a more attentive and sympathetic reading of Carver's characters' imaginations and emotions, and even in closely reading perhaps Carver's most enigmatic story, "Why Don't You Dance?"

In "Surface Knowledge and 'Deep' Knowledge: The New Realism in American Fiction," Winfried Fluck contrasts the "skillful insinuations of Hemingway" with Carver's stories, which unlike Hemingway's,

> No longer offer such promises of a "deep knowledge." In Carver's work, crises and catastrophes are not heroic moments valued for their potential to reveal an existential truth, but accidental occurrences in a dehierarchized sequence of daily events. Consequently, the characters that experience them are not transformed or deeply affected by them, but

continue to live on as before. (71-72)

Even so, as Fluck notes, characters in Carver's stories do experience "defamiliarization" and "emotional displacement," although such characters, because of their "weak identities," fail to be significantly altered by their experiences, and he cites "Why Don't You Dance?" as a story that demonstrates this (71-72).

Fluck cites the actual moments triggered by the man's question to the couple, "Why don't you dance?" leading to the "bizarre scene" of the dance of the man and girl, as constituting the climax of the story (73). Even so, according to Fluck,

> It is not a climax or epiphany that could provide the rest of the story with 'actual' meaning. There is no teleology, sustained argument, or moral structure in Carver's story, just a chain of events in which one scene acquires an inexplicable, almost surreal transcendence for the briefest of moments (73).

"Why Don't You Dance?" does end peculiarly, certainly. The ending is enigmatic enough: "She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying" (What 10). Seemingly, the girl's attempts to make sense of her own experience(s) when she bought the man's bed, television, and accepted his gift of his records and record player remains unexplained; seemingly, she recognizes that something strange or unusual happened in her life, but she is unable to gain any

specific knowledge or understanding from her encounter. The story seems to end with her failure to locate a certain meaning or significance from her experience there. However, and significantly, she also feels compelled to recount her story: "She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out" (10). As the omniscient narrator affirms: "There was more to it" (10). Many readers might agree. Although such brief, mysterious, stories may seem incomplete, there must be more to them, and "Why Don't You Dance?" perhaps, Carver's most enigmatic story, is no exception.

"Why Don't You Dance?" occupies only seven pages of text; remarkably, this story reflects some of Carver's most important themes--the displacement of social communion by a materialistic culture and the loss of male status and a strong sense of personal identity, all experienced by the man in this story. These themes are not fully recognized or appreciated by the girl; even so, readers may recognize them, as well as another theme: the displacement of an older generation--one more gracious--by a younger, more materialistic, generation. Other stories confirm this "generation gap." "Gazebo," "Fever," "Elephant," "Sacks," "Why, Honey?" "The Father," "The Cabin," "After the Denim," "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" and "Errand" emphasize deeply the difference between an older, more stable, usually more recognizably moral and authentically caring generation from a younger generation, one confused, and less reliable and caring, if more energetic than the older one. As Robert Towers observes,

"Again and again the values--or merely the dignity--of a doomed older generation are contrasted with the drifting lives of their successors, whether middle-aged or young" (37). Carver's "Why Don't You Dance?" is a clear and thoughtfully detailed story, which carefully emphasizes this point.

"Why Don't You Dance?" is, in part, a story of the contemporary, acquisitive young, removing from the middle-aged man important and painful reminders of his previous marriage. The man also gives away his records and record player--formerly important objects for him. When he sees and talks to this young couple, he is doubtless reminded of his own marriage; they represent for him an earlier, happier time, and he turns off the television, plays his records and asks the couple, "Why don't you dance?" Indeed, for him, the dance is important--it not only typifies a happier time; it is a gesture that affirms love in action, one that is both intimate and culturally acceptable--but the responses of the boy and girl are not as graciously rendered. The boy immediately declines: "'I don't think so,' the boy said" (8). The girl, when she does dance with him, calls him "desperate" (9). Not only are they of a different generation, it is clear in the story that the man is also unable to decide if the couple are "nice or nasty" (8) and just as the girl can not satisfactorily explain the significance of her experiences in his yard or account for his behavior, he also is unable to be accepted by them. He is unable to determine the nature of their faces: "There was no telling" (8). And this is, it seems to me,

the major theme of this story and of many of Carver's stories: that people have become estranged from each other, largely because of the division of those that seek money or psychological power over others from those who do seek to "connect" with others but who are often met with resentment, indifference, or insensitivity.

The shift of focus of "Why Don't You Dance?" is another "clue" used to emphasize underlying themes and concerns of this story. Critics who fault this story's "enigmatic ending" because the girl cannot make adequate sense of her experience actually miss the point: that the story is not primarily about her. Instead, her lack of adequate commentary actually redirects a reader's attention to the context of the man's plight and his dance. Also, the shift of focus is part of the shift of time's progress in this story. Allusion is made to the man's moving of his furniture and other household items "that morning" (4), but the story really begins close to dusk, and various clues are given that describe the approaching darkness of night (including the light coming on in houses "up and down the street," the presence of a mosquito, the boy tucking in his shirt, and the man turning on the floor lamp). As such, the shifting scene emphasizes the approaching darkness, a symbol of the death of the middle-aged man and his cultural assumptions. The girl earlier indirectly alludes to the possibility of his death, as noted in Chapter 2 ("wouldn't it be funny if" [5]). The predatory, materialistic character of both the boy and girl is in marked

contrast to the man's graciousness towards them--he offers them drink and music to dance by--he gives them gifts and he refuses to bargain for a favorable purchase price of his furniture and household items.

Although the girl is sympathetic towards him when dancing, her contact with him is not especially gracious or tender: these are not qualities she seems to possess. Just as she asserts her will over her boyfriend by telling him how to bid, and telling him to kiss her, she willfully pushes her face into the man's shoulder when dancing, and pulls him closer to her and calls him "desperate" (9). A "product of the eighties," both young people are intent on gaining an advantage in dealing with the man: the boy never asks his name--he makes his check out to cash, for example--he considers carefully the prices of items and holds his checkbook to his lips "as if thinking" (7). Not only does the boy never act in a friendly manner with the man; he never really converses with him outside the context of the purchase price of the items for sale. One of the boy's first independent actions that he takes when he first examines the man's furnishings is to light a cigarette and flip his match into the grass (anything but a gesture of good manners). Clearly, the sensibilities of the young couple are different from the man's: while he is generous, they are insulting and dismissive. The girl, for example, calls his records (a gift) "crappy" and her speech is vulgar and offensive to someone of the man's generation's sensibilities. Confiding to a friend, she tells something about her experience

in terms that belittle the man:

> "The guy was about middle-aged. All his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my God. Don't laugh. He played us these records. Look at this record player. The old guy gave it to us. And all these crappy records. Will you look at this shit?" (What 9-10)

More significantly, perhaps, is the man's loss of his manhood, as evidenced by his giving away his formerly cherished (and romantic) records and record player--and his bed, which he simply calls "a good bed." In fact, the first thing he says to the girl is: "Hello . . . You found the bed. That's good" (6).

Careful readers surely can "read between the lines" here, and his drinking and exhibitionistic placing of his furniture outside are all of a piece--together they describe a man who has been emotionally dispossessed and who is now attempting to take stock of his life and move forward by ridding himself of painful past memories. A reader might easily view this "yard sale" as a means of catharsis for the man, and as a way for him to reach out to others, even to strangers. The situation of the man is poignant, but the girl's interpretation of it underscores his displacement from his own society and culture, a society that seems to place less and less regard and respect towards men who are merely ordinary.

Various stories of Carver's describe this devaluation of

males who are married and divorced. Although Carver is not blind to the cruelties and selfish brutalities of many males--witness such stories' themes as found in "So Much Water So Close to Home," "Are These Actual Miles?" "Tell the Women We're Going," "Why, Honey?" "The Student's Wife," and "Blackbird Pie," in which males are shown or described otherwise as being insensitive and domineering ("So Much Water So Close to Home"); cruel, threatening and brutally violent ("Tell the Women We're Going" and "Why, Honey?"); and distanced or emotionally divorced from their wives ("Are These Actual Miles?" "The Student's Wife," and "Blackbird Pie"). In short, Carver is no misogynist; however, many of his stories recount a male character's loss of status or manhood in contexts describing domineering or abusive women. While some couples get along well (as those in "Neighbors," "Put Yourself in My Shoes," "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," "After the Denim," "Cathedral," A Small, Good Thing," "Boxes," and "Whoever Was Using This Bed"), many more do not, and in these relationships the women, whether wives or girlfriends, seem domineering, threatening, or uncaring towards their male counterparts.

For example, in "Why Don't You Dance?" the boy never makes a move without his girlfriend's consent or directions. At times, for example, when bidding, she tells him how to act; at other times, her requests take on the status of commands: "'That's enough,' the girl said. 'I think I want water with mine'" (7). Also, the boy's statement, "We're interested in the bed and maybe

the T.V. Also maybe the desk" (6) describes his ongoing need to meet her approval first. Clearly, he is also uncomfortable ("I feel funny") when she tells him twice to (first) try the bed and (secondly) to kiss her. His single act of assertion towards her is to ask, "So what do you want?" (7). As various critics have noted, their conversation and behavior suggest that they, too, will be breaking up in the future, just like the man and his wife did (May, The Short Story 94; Meyer, Raymond Carver 88; Nesset, The Stories 38). According to Campbell, "Human experience almost dictates it [their chaotic future]" (Raymond Carver 45).

As Nesset notes, "In the most obvious sense, the boy and the girl are symbolic stand-ins for the couple who bought the bed and shared it before. Less obviously, their conversation betrays tensions in their own relationship" (38). Careful readers consider these psychological tensions and find a story that suggests a potential for emotional growth--for the girl and the boy--by relating to the man in a more empathetic and communicative manner. But even though the girl does dance with the man, it is clear that they as a couple are takers and not givers or sharers, and lack the foundations of trust that might lead to their emotional growth. "Why Don't You Dance?" and other Carver stories seem to underscore that acting upon human desire (the desire to dance, listen to music, enjoy "social drinking," to cite some examples here) is a necessary precondition for closer communication, communion, and moral growth, but that it is not sufficient--there must also be a trust and willingness to do

so. That the girl does not quite understand the significance of her dance and encounter with the man is obvious and underscores for the reader her emotional limitations. Arthur Saltzman comments: "There is something especially chilling and depressing about the girl's casual acceptance of mutual incomprehensibility" (103).

The disconnection that the girl comes to feel at the story's conclusion is foreshadowed by Carver's "understated" language of the placement of bedroom furniture and sides of the bed: "His side, her side" (May, Short Story 93). This lack of connection, but sustained disconnection, is amplified by the "inversion of [the man's] home" (Saltzman 101); his "ruins" of his marriage outside for all to gawk at (Campbell, Raymond Carver 43). May notes in The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice how this story "emphasizes the Chekovian use of concrete details to communicate hidden reality" (144). In "Why Don't You Dance?" the objects do give readers information from which to better understand its characters--the story is not merely enigmatic or obsessed with surface detail to the exclusion of story. Even so, it also aptly suggests contexts for stories: a human exchange, given freely and in trust, leading to character growth.

Carver's use of informing objects is largely a question of their value in this story. The central "good" object, the bed, is, of course, where another story of the man's began and ended. But Carver's use of concretizing language, language that draws attention to their physicality and utility ("Except for that,

things looked much the way they had in the bedroom" [3] and "[E]verything was connected. Things worked, no different from how it was when they were inside" [4]) also emphasizes how unsolid and unreliable the behaviors and intentions of Carver's characters are when they are not connected and cared for, and how poignant their sufferings must seem when they are abandoned and forgotten. "Why Don't You Dance?" is a poignant plea, disguised, perhaps, by what Saltzman finds to be the man's tone of "regulated bemusement that is the stage beyond despair" (101). But although they dance, the quality of their dancing lacks a necessary trust and graciousness, requirements for moral growth, as I read this Carver story, so, consequently, the girl obtains no closure from her experience. Even so, the story remains semiopen for readers who can imagine the necessary contexts for such closure.

"Why Don't You Dance?" was one of Carver's first stories written after his cessation of drinking alcohol in 1977, and in its brief form a fitting beginning to his most "minimal" collection of stories, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. Although it is often cited as an example of stories that lack a clear resolution, the story's resolution is achieved by its readers, who imaginatively participate in it and ask questions about it. Even so, various "clues" are present within it to allow readers to do this. An obvious message is also conveyed nonverbally when the girl and the boy look at one another in their recognition of the fact that the man does not

insist on his asking price: just as the girl suggested, asking ten dollars less per item is a successful business technique. Also, readers may infer from the placement of the line, "The girl looked at the boy," coming just after the third time the man says he "would take" less, that the man is more interested in getting rid of his past memories than in investing for the future. Much is revealed about all three characters in this short exchange of bidding, so that readers can continue to successfully infer from consistently placed "clues" that for the man, at least, such household items are all almost meaningless without an "informing" home life, but that for the girl and boy such items have a tangible value or not with respect to their utility and larger cultural status (for the girl, the man's once cherished records are "crappy" and "shit"). In seven pages, "Why Don't You Dance?" is anything but a "minimal story": its thematic concerns were appropriate when it was written and remain so today, and readers can imaginatively explore and consider these.

Jürgen Pieters asserts that in "Why Don't You Dance?" the "characters are mere pronouns" whom readers, "out of sheer necessity, some inexplicable thirst for meaning or truth, [construct] a sense of 'real characters' around" (64, 65); and that because characters fail to change in this story, it must remain "utterly static" (67). However, readers do find this story to be a complete story; the characters do change, even if the potential exists and is lost for greater, more significant change. More importantly, this story is hardly static for

careful and imaginative readers. Lastly, the question of the use of pronouns for the three characters does not significantly alter our reading of the story. We notice that the girl calls the boy "Jack" at one point, and we assume that the other characters have names also, even though readers do not know them. If "the girl" were given the name of "Sally," for instance, would this add to this story's impact for readers? I doubt it; probably the reverse is true. Readers may more closely attend to other elements of the story (whether foregrounded or backgrounded), and be kept more alert for any detail out of the ordinary.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that some of Carver's stories of this period were expanded and made subsequently fuller, the best illustration of this being how the expanded "A Small, Good Thing" became so much more comprehensive than its prototype "The Bath" that Carver imagines them and calls them "two entirely different stories not just different versions of the same stories" (McCaffery and Gregory 102). Significantly, the later story includes more descriptive detail and dialogue, and attends to the characters' lives more fully (although some readers prefer the greater immediacy of "The Bath").

Pieters also maintains that in "Why Don't You Dance?" the verbs used actually work to foreground the static quality of this story, and he cites half of the third paragraph to illustrate the overall static quality of the story (68):

> The chiffonier <u>stood</u> a few feet from the foot of the bed. He had emptied the drawers into cartons that

> morning and the cartons were in the living room. A portable heater was next to the chiffonier. A rattan chair with a decorator pillow stood at the foot of the bed. The buffed aluminum kitchen took up a part of the driveway. A muslin cloth, much too large, covered the table, and hung down over the sides. (What 3-4) (His italics)

According to Pieters, this inclusion of verbs of position "set[s] the static atmosphere by which the story is pervaded" (69). By themselves, of course, they could not do this, but Pieters adds that together with slowing cars, the priority of the man's looking at his furniture to a description of him moving it outside, and the girl's backward-gazing narrative--these, and Carver's descriptions of non-actions, his focus upon iconic imagery, and the limited dialogue of the characters--work to slow the story's narrative speed to a "reduced, slowed down" transmission (69).

Of course, he is right about Carver's deliberate use of thoughtful, slowed-down description to help to reify a story. But the man's gazing out his kitchen window while pouring himself another drink actually begins the story, and the girl's backward gazing helps to "frame" it--even though both observations are not merely static and carry the thematic implications described above. Likewise, looking closely at the verbs of "position" underlined above with those below, which follow in the same paragraph--"fern was on the table . . . television set rested on

. . . stood a sofa and chair . . . desk was pushed against (emphasis mine)--also conveys, on a subconscious level, a personified presence. Furniture and household objects may act as informing "subjects," a kind of man-made chorus that "witnesses" the human drama presented there. Can personification be found in a Carver story? Yes, in "Are These Actual Miles?" to cite just one example, the tires on their convertible "give a little scream" as Toni accelerates away to make an immoral "deal" with a customer, offering her body to cover the "bankrupt" Leo.

Although they may be "survivors," Carver's characters face threats to a secure source of identity, and often in the case of his male characters, threats to their sense of manhood. These threats typically are associated with financial insecurity. Few cultures, perhaps, equate successful manhood with material wealth as much as the American one; conversely, one's manhood is called in question if one is poor or has difficulty making his way in the financial world. In "Are These Actual Miles?" Toni tells Leo as she pats her hair in the mirror, "You're nothing" and "teasing" him, and later, after she returns from her "sale," she screams at him "Bankrupt!" and, "She twists loose, grabs and tears his undershirt at the neck. 'You son of a bitch,' she says, clawing" (Where 136). While this story describes the tenuousness of manhood within a threatening culture in an extreme way, to the extent that Leo considers hanging himself ("He understands he is willing to be dead" [132]), this story of male humiliation and loss of manhood is a familiar theme in several

Carver stories.

In only a relatively few stories do male characters transcend circumstances that, in effect, seem to question their manhood. The protagonists of "Where I'm Calling From" and "Elephant" and "Intimacy" find ways to redeem themselves in their own eyes, but in the earlier stories especially, many male characters suffer the psychological stresses of unemployment, alcoholic incapacitation, and the inertia resulting from a collapsed or collapsing marriage. This is not to say that, in many cases, the men are not at fault--in being alcoholics, or in being in debt, or in being unemployed, or in being apathetic. Even so, Carver's stories are often realistic in their presentation of circumstances that tend to limit character growth and development; in particular, the theme of men belittled by their wives and by "society," which reinforces their lack of financial accomplishments by treating them as inferior.

In "The Cabin," in my opinion, one of Carver's best stories, the protagonist, Mr. Harrold, follows a pattern of past fishing vacations with his wife, but this time she is unaccountably absent; although Mr. Harrold tells Mrs. Maye that "She didn't feel too well this week," when she tells him she's sorry his wife couldn't come, he does not answer her (Fires 147, 148). The implications of her nonappearance are various; although she may be simply sick, this seems unlikely because of the pointed way Mr. Harrold notices a man holding a woman's arm as they go down steps, and by his pronounced negative response to

the young waitress, who seems preoccupied with other thoughts (146, 150). Clearly, something about his wife's presence or absence has affected him subconsciously and unsettled him.

It should be recognized here that the threat or menace affecting Mr. Harrold is internal: the disturbance and his responses are primary and subconscious, and exist close to his sense of self and this sense of self includes his sense of his own manhood. The inattentive young waitress has "touched a nerve" by first questioning his reservation and acting indifferently towards him, and the younger couple feel what he can not or does not feel now. Even Mrs. Maye, his only friendly acquaintance, looks more like Mrs. December now and hobbles up an incline to see him settled in. Telling him "You're probably tired driving all that way" (148), she obviously regards him as being somewhat elderly, as well. But although he is conscious of all he observes, the story's "clues" seem to suggest that Mr. Harrold is more vulnerable to future threats than he is willing to admit. In fact, "The Cabin" contrasts Mr. Harrold's own illusions of himself as a kind of knight-errant, with his fishing rod held up, to the reality of his own vulnerability at the hands of a small group of threatening youths with guns.

As Ewing Campbell observes, "His response is a quixotic challenge to the barbarous who do not know or care about the traditional codes of hunting," but he ends up experiencing the chilly river, a dry throat, uncontrollable yawning, and an

> emotional manifestation called <u>chasmus hysterius</u> and

> in confusion, he rushes back to the cabin, losing his [symbolic male phallic] rod somewhere along the way. Back at the cabin he senses that he has lost something heroic, which existed only in his fantasies and nostalgic reveries of the past. (Raymond Carver 5)

Mr. Harrold's emasculation is not just a physical feeling, but given his earlier feelings and sensibilities, this must change him in some more fundamental way--thus Carver's story is not merely about losing one's virility--it touches more fundamentally upon Mr. Harrold's psyche: his sense of identity and male selfhood.

Closely reading stories such as "The Cabin" allows readers to not only attend to the story's textually, but to appreciate the stories "within" characters, those not explicated but bearing upon a character's emotional and imaginative life. In fact, Carver's realism is significant to the extent that it allows surrealism and expressionism to influence its presentation. Despite critical assumptions to the contrary, Carver's focus really is as he describes it, for readers, "a unity of feeling and understanding" ("Fiction of Occurrence and Consequence" 150), and as mentioned earlier, first an emotional connecting up and then an intellectual connecting up.

But Carver's method for achieving this degree of reader engagement is not just what occurs on the surface of events present in his stories--the point made by his most negative

critics--instead, and in accordance with short story theory regarding what stories can succeed at best, Carver's stories first engage readers almost at a subconscious level (for they use mythic or primal elements to engage primary concerns, such as identity loss) and also provide "clues" for readers to be challenged by, to better read and understand his stories.

Even so, Carver's stories contrive to engage readers by their partial withholding of "certainties," which are, of course, subject to interpretation. An element of mystery allows readers to construct their own precluding stories and tonalities. For example, Jeffrey Birkenstein citing Charles E. May's interpretation of Chekov's dependence upon "a single situation in which everyday reality is broken up by a crisis" ("Chekov" 201), locates this crises in "The Cabin" at the point where the wounded deer first appears to Mr. Harrold:

> The deer represents his own foolishness with regards to the decisions he has made in his own life, and begins to address the issue of his missing wife: her absence is unexplained, but his longing for her is not. (51)

Other commentators may locate the origins of this "story behind the story" having been presented forcibly earlier. For others, Mr. Harrold's existential crisis does not begin until he becomes a threatened target himself by the delinquent and destructive young hunters. In all cases, however, it is clear that Carver presents not just a series of events realized

externally, but suggests another story (as Walton Beacham describes the task of short story writers), the "real story," lying "within the reader's lower levels of consciousness (qtd. in Barry Menikoff 134)--and I would add, within the lower levels of the character's consciousness, although that constitutes only part of the potential story for readers. Carver maintains that his literature is not just expression, but it is communication. However, what it communicates is often presented first in a language directed towards a reader's subconscious or emotional world, and then later towards a reader's consciousness.

One of the best ways to confirm this view would be to consider Carver's early and middle career preoccupation with dreams in his stories: first with nightmares, often in a gothic vein and then later as less bizarre dreams. Although the role dreams play in Carver's stories will be considered more fully in the next chapter, it is useful to note, in considering Carver as a neorealist, just how predominant they seem to be in his stories. In fact, they may be said to haunt his early and middle stories and exist on an imaginative spectrum that includes reveries, daydreams, and horrible, terrifying nightmares. This sensibility is far removed from the minimalist or Dirty Realist label, neither one of which is adequate to explore Carver's aesthetic of human desire. Amazingly, daydreams, dreams, and nightmares inhabit the imaginations of a significantly large number of Carver's characters. From "Fat" to "Night School" to "What's in Alaska" to "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" in

Carver's first collection; from "So Much Water So Close to Home" to "Furious Seasons" from Furious Seasons; from "Gazebo" to "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" in Carver's third collection, including James' reveries in "After the Denim," dreams affect Carver's characters, who reveal themselves as suggestible--if freely willful and autonomous--and highly and imaginative "people."

Chapter 4

SHORT STORY THEORY AND CARVER'S STORIES

Raymond Carver's stories are neither merely superficial nor minimalistic, neither hyperrealistic nor nihilistic, but both realistic and expressionistic, a blending of the ordinary and the surreal; in short, complex and multilayered. However, their focus is upon the internal struggles and obsessions of their characters (whom Carver calls "people").

In my investigation of short story theory, this reference point of characters' struggles will be used to determine how Carver's stories work successfully to engage readers, both emotionally and intellectually. But in considering the internal struggles and imaginations of Carver's characters, readers should also consider that these also are recognizably grounded in the real world of human experience. Although Carver's stories are fictions and his characters fictive, when reading them from the contexts of short story theory, it is important to recognize this grounding, which gives Carver's stories much of their affective power. As Carver acknowledges to David Applefield:

> Every story I've written, with maybe one or two exceptions, has had its starting point in the real world. . . .There isn't a story in any of my books that hasn't really come from something I've witnessed, lived through, or overheard. (210-211)

Although Carver wrote stories as he says, in "the realistic tradition," his stories tend, especially, to foreground the imaginations and emotional concerns of characters, or to constantly suggest these and other menaces that exist "below the surface." According to most contemporary short story theorists, stories tend to foreground qualities, themes, and ideas, which exist below the surface of narrative; as Mary Rohrberger notes, "in the short story, meaning lies beneath the surface of the narrative" ("The Short Story: A Proposed Definition" 81). Of course, short stories typically do not contain complex or involved plots because of their brevity, but they reward readers in other ways. According to Richard Kostelanetz, the short story writer must depict "in depth rather than in breadth" the story that is there (215). For most contemporary short story theorists and general readers alike, the essence of storyness transcends the plots of stories.

Carver's first mentor and teacher of storywriting, John Gardner, asserts in <u>On Becoming a Novelist</u> that one quality of an excellent work of fiction is that it is dreamlike in its working upon a reader's imagination:

> We slip into a dream, forgetting the room we're sitting in, forgetting it's lunchtime or time to go to work. We recreate with minor and for the most part unimportant changes, the vivid and continuous <u>dream</u> the writer worked out . . ." (5).

Other authors and critics have made a similar point about

short stories having attributes of dreams, even those about recognizably "real" characters. As noted earlier, Joyce Carol Oates describes the short story as a "dream verbalized" and a "manifestation of desire, perhaps only partly expressed," and having an element of "mystery" (214). Mary Rohrberger and Dan E. Burns add that a short story's "images from the phenomenal world are transposed to the numinous realm, where they are free to operate in the reader's mind metaphorically, as in a dream" (6).

Clare Hanson adds to this view in her essay "'Things Out of Words': Towards a Poetics of Short Fiction" by describing the short story as a form that "is committed to the unknown, precisely to the obscure object of desire" (30). Even so, although a story may contain an element of mystery or obscurity, as Hanson observes, because of "the tight structure and strict requirements of the short story form," readers read this as a form that acts "in the widest sense as a frame, or limit, which allows a narrative to remain in a more fragmented but also in a more suggestive state than is possible in the novel" (25).

Readers, according to Hanson, thus accept

> ellipses (gaps or absences) . . . in the story, which retains a necessary air of completeness and order because of the very existence of the frame. We thus accept a degree of mystery, ellision [sic], uncertainty in the short story as we would not in the novel. (25)

Both writers and readers of this genre

> allow images from the unconscious mind to fuel a short story and to present themselves in the text in a relatively untranslated state. Such images retain an air of mystery and impenetrability, an air of dream. They exist as much as figures of unconscious desires as consciously represented images. (25)

Hanson adds that

> ellision [sic] in the short story relates to the movement of desire on the part of the reader. The imagination of the reader is stirred in a particular way by the elliptical structure of many short stories. Ellisions [sic] and gaps within a text offer a special space for the workings of the reader's imagination, offer space for the image-making faculty which would otherwise lie dormant: the reader's desire is thus allowed, or rather invited, to enter the text. (25)

Hanson, commenting upon the admission of authors as diverse as Kipling, Mansfield, Hemingway, Bowen, Frank O'Connor, and Flannery O'Connor, to the informing role of dreams in helping to construct their stories, goes further by suggesting that short stories may be structured like dreams (26), and that "in its connection with the unknown and with fantasy the short story is a form which is close to the unconscious" (31). According to Charles E. May, one of the functions of the short story is to question our everyday assumptions about the world and people, and a story's informing context might include "an encounter with the

sacred (in which true reality is revealed in all its plenitude) or with the absurd (in which true reality is revealed in all its vacuity)" ("The Nature of Knowledge" 133). The short story, according to May, "exists to 'defamiliarize' the everyday" (133). Short stories tend to bring to the surface of consciousness, for characters and readers, aspects of reality interpreted by and related to the unconscious mind. Carver's stories include characters who dream and tell stories, and these are incorporated into his stories to intensify shifts of sensibilities of characters to and from their conscious and subconscious minds. Additionally, Carver's use of characters' dissociation complements the ways stories act to defamiliarize the everyday: characters in Carver's stories are suggestible and highly imaginative and open to explorations of unconscious desire. Images in Carver's stories also act upon characters' imaginations and upon those of readers.

The role of stories to engage readers both textually (literally) and subconsciously--by images primarily, though also by narrative--is discussed in Hanson's essay. Hanson also suggests that language itself is at least partially interpreted within the context of human desire (24). The cumulative effects of one sentence building upon another in a narrative, whose frame gives it an additional resonance in a single reading, would seem to underscore the potential informing power of unconscious desire upon the short story's text. Unconscious desire, whether located in specific tropes, images, imaginations, dreams, or stories-

within-stories, helps to constitute the story below the surface of plot or narrative, for Carver's characters and for his readers. As Charles E. May observes in "Reality in the Modern Short Story," "indeed in the modern short story, idealized human desire--unsayable, unrealizable, always hovering, like religious experience in the realm of the 'not yet'--replaces the sacred revelation embodied in primal short-fiction forms" (372). And, in "Chekov and the Modern Short Story," May declares a "notion of character as mood and story as a hazy 'eventless' becoming is characteristic of the modern artistic understanding of story," and that "rather than plot, what unifies the modern short story is an atmosphere, a certain tone of significance" (200, 201). Walton Beacham's definition of the short story, as a "'process of suggestion,' with the real story 'lying within the reader's lower levels of consciousness'" (qtd. in Menikoff 134), describes two ways to read stories: stories as literary works of art and stories as processes within a reader's psyche.

What gives such tonalities and atmospheres coherence in a short story's text has been described by Charles E. May and Suzanne Ferguson as the presentation and climax of a particularly meaningful experience--if not always for a character, certainly for a reader--the intensification of significance within a special moment. Ferguson comments that

> in the short story, we frequently see only one such privileged moment, which takes the place of the traditional 'turning point,' the climax of the plot.

> Not much actual dramatized time passes, although in the memory and fantasy of the characters large reaches of 'time' may be covered. (225)

Working to give cohesion to this brief passage of time are selected details of an "impressionistic" nature, which according to Ferguson, may be used as settings to "metaphorically . . . substitute for representation of action or analysis" (225). For Carver, as well, "the gradual accretion of meaningful detail" is an important criterion for a story's success and overall quality; when added together, such details have a cumulative power ("All My Relations" 136).

Together with a coherent field of impressionistic details and informing and symbolic imagery, short stories work to engage readers by what Donna Gerstenberger and Frederick Garber call "the truth of the imagination," which for them must necessarily reflect the contexts of human experience (3). And with respect to a story's potential significance, there must be characters whose inner lives are subject to some "significant internal change," as noted by Jarvis Thurston (16). What is central to a short story, as described by most contemporary short story theorists, is an exploration of a character's psychological world, and, specifically, his or her imaginative possibilities; stories act as venues for their expression and the working out of their desires, and the rendering of how characters encounter and handle their resultant conflicts. Michael Wood's comment, that "Mr. Carver's characters are imaginative in the extreme, almost

obsessively concerned with the minds of other people and their own fright" (34), emphasizes the difficulty of trying to analyze a collection of Carver's stories in detail: their subjective imaginations are active as they live through, and narrate, their own stories.

But according to May, one means by which short story writers who are realists can "express inner reality [is] by describing outer reality" through the use of informing objects and metonymic details, which because of the "thematic demands of the story" are "transformed into metaphoric meaning" ("Reality" 374). May cites "Why Don't You Dance?" as an example of Carver's technique of objectifying the "inner reality" of the unnamed man by his placing of furniture outside his house: the "inner reality" is thereby foregrounded within the story (377).

By expressing a story's concerns through the objectification of inner states of a character's subconscious, and by obtaining a coherence of metonymic detail, readers are informed about what is at stake for characters. Even so, stories may also suggest more for readers than how a particular character is affected by his or her experiences. Stories may also suggest a deeper story than the character's stories and additional ideas not specifically engaged by story characters. Because short stories may often act to question the world of "everyday experience," a reader's response may sustain a story's affect. For example, a story like "The Cabin" works to demythologize Mr. Harrold's role as a knight-errant with the merest of details--as well as by his encounter

with the wayward youths--with the inclusion of his snack of cookies (Clarke 110). Readers know, perhaps, more about the influence of Mr. Harrold's fantasy life upon his behavior than "he does himself," at some point, and readers gain a larger perspective of his world than any character in the story does (even though the author is not condescending to his characters).

John Gerlach comments that "story proper is more accurately defined by speculations it encourages on the part of the reader than by what actually occurs in the reported event. Plot is not necessary, nor is a fleshed-out sense of character and motive" (80). In this sense, stories should remain "open," for a time, for readers after the stories have been read. Characters, also, need not obtain complete closure within the confines of a story's limited space-time frame, even though such potentialities should exist for characters to be able to benefit from their own significant experiences and from those of other characters. Thus, stories must provide a degree of potential emotional and intellectual closure for their characters, even though not all characters may actually obtain a significant degree of closure. While stories exist in one sense, at least, autonomously, what is more significant about them, about "fiction that matters," as Carver asserts, is how "the significance of the action inside the story translates to the lives of people outside the story [their readers]" ("Fiction That Throws Light on Blackness" 184). Readers also help to inform a story's significance for themselves, even as they are informed and engaged by the story. If, as Clare and

May maintain, that a story suggests themes infused by unconscious desires, readers engage in reading stories both consciously and subconsciously.

To sum up characteristics most contemporary short story theorists have used to describe how short stories successfully engage readers, Charles E. May, in his introduction to The New Short Story Theories, gives the following description of what he calls their "family resemblances" and how (in general) short stories are related to their historic precursors:

> In their very shortness, short stories have remained close to the original source of narrative in myth, folktale, fable, and fairy tale. They, therefore, are more apt to focus on basic desires, dreams, anxieties and fears than novels are and thus are more aligned with the original religious nature of narrative. Short stories are therefore more apt to embody a timeless theme and are thus less dependent on a social context than novels. Consequently, short stories are more likely to identify characters in archetypal terms and are more patterned and aesthetically unified than novels are. For this reason, short stories are more dependent on craftsmanship and exhibit more authorial control than novels, making them closer to poetry and thus more "artistic." (xxvi)

Because of their brevity, stories can achieve an immediacy and intensity that novels cannot; and also because of their

brevity, everything within them, including their formal elements, should cohere to create an aesthetic whole. (This, of course, includes every word and informing ellipse, as Allan Pasco stresses in "On Defining Short Stories," [125].) Although short story theorists do not always insist that short stories must be written to produce, as Edgar Allan Poe asserts, "a certain unique or single effect" (47), reader engagement results from well-constructed stories that may work on various levels, complexly, and below the surface of conscious awareness: for example, their imagery may stimulate repressed desires for readers.

A short story may contain a narrative that provides conscious meaning for a character and a reader, while additionally providing images, which because of their close proximity to the unconscious mind, work in an "adversarial relationship to discourse (narrative)--desire murders, condenses, freezes narrative" (Hanson 28). Regardless of the truth of the interaction of narrative and imagery, clearly it is possible for imagery and other formal elements to cause readers to question stories they read, and to continue to be engaged by their suggestions and implications. Most contemporary short story theorists find highly significant the emphasis in most short stories upon human desire and the unconscious. These stories provide an ongoing engagement for readers, which because of their openness, allow readers to imaginatively explore them. As mentioned earlier, short stories are not reducible to merely the exposition of plot, and this suggests the appropriateness of

Carver's own goal regarding stories, that first there comes an emotional "connecting up" for readers, and later, an intellectual "connecting up." Although readers may disagree about the meanings located within his stories--some being established by inference, others by objectifications, others only hinted at--repeated readings may help readers to better locate these; inasmuch as Carver informs his stories with an iconic intensity, which together with carefully rendered voices, give his stories a powerful imaginative affect for readers. Carver's stories may thus describe a "truth of the imagination," even if declaiming such a truth adequately might prove to be difficult or impossible.

Even so, when a coherence of formal elements occurs, some interpretations become more persuasive than others. Carver's imagery typically supports and coheres with his narrative, or becomes immediately a foregrounded or backgrounded context for his story. For example, in "The Fling," the contrast between Les's father's need to be "understood"--for his past experiences to be seen in a more forgiving and illuminating context--is undermined by the proximity of an ashtray, whose bottom reads "HARRAH'S CLUB RENO AND LAKE TAHOE: good places to have fun" (Furious Seasons 65). Other insistent images tend to crowd out the father's narrative and compete for the son's--and the reader's--attention: 1) the forgotten white confectionery sack, recalling another informing image of the story, 2) Sally Wain's "little paper sack" and 3) the woman at the airport bar, who

tosses her long red hair and snaps her fingers to music and gathers a crowd of applauding onlookers. In these contexts, Mr. Palmer's "fling" looks, on one level, unimportant to his son, even though he clearly still resents his father for it. Readers, however, probably respond to the father more empathetically. Carver's use of informing imagery is so interwoven with this story that it would hardly exist without it.

When Carver rewrites and excises large portions of this story to make "Sacks" (included in What We Talk About), he places the one framing image in his title, and it is the father in "Sacks" who notices the dancer and not the son--who even declines to reply to his question about her ("Did you see that?")--which makes the father now seem not only pitiful (an image projected by the forgotten sack on the bar) but also seem to be a less sympathetic character. As such, the later story suffers by comparison, for readers of "Sacks" probably lack empathy for either father or son. How characters respond to images gives readers distinct impressions of characters and about thematic elements within each story. Carver's better stories allow these images to help characters explore their concerns and lives imaginatively; readers, also, typically become engaged to do the same.

George Tylutki maintains that no universally acceptable definition of the short story and its constituent elements is possible and that it may take various forms; however, he concedes that of these two requirements of short stories, plot and

character, character is the more important (89).

Even so, short stories cannot render characters fully, nor follow them through any sustained period of time. Readers know them intuitively, perhaps, from how their imaginative lives are rendered, and by the way short story writers inform readers, sometimes indirectly, about their specific dreams and desires. Various commentaries about how characters are represented in short stories seem to suggest that this genre is effective in focusing upon the individual rather than the group. As Randall Jarrell observes, the short story underscores the "primacy of [individual] wish fulfillment or desire over truth"; in fact, in "narrative [fiction], to understand everything is to get nowhere" (6,13). We have seen this kind of comment before: that for short stories to succeed, they must not only stir a reader emotionally, but also involve a reader's imagination by their depth of implication and suggestiveness. What makes stories work for readers, as Jarrell observes, is to allow them to move between the range of anticipation and complete fulfillment of desire (14). Short stories also seem to highlight a character who is in some special crisis, who is for a brief period undergoing some particular emotional stress or conflict.

In Charles E. May's introduction to Short Story Theories, he speculates:

> [I]f the contemporary short story is fragmentary and inconclusive, perhaps it is because the form is best able to convey the sense that reality itself is

> fragmentary and inconclusive. Such a view should be especially pertinent to the modern world. (5)

The so-called open story, in which the ending appears fragmented or without seeming story closure, oftentimes, but not always, works to emphasize for readers a character's own lack of closure; characters may, for example, in a Carver story, seem dazed or uncomprehending at the end of a story. However, I would maintain, such apparent similarity of nonclosure of a reader's story and a character's story, though perhaps intended by the author, is actually only momentarily "realized" in a reader's mind. Carver's stories do not provide obvious closure, at times, which may require readers to speculate about a story after reading its ending.

Charles E. May describes the short story's typical focus as one that "exists to 'defamiliarize' the everyday" because of its ability to focus upon and intensely render "moments when we are made aware of the inauthenticity of everyday life, those moments when we sense the inadequacy of our categories of conceptual reality" ("The Nature of Knowledge" 133, 142). If paradoxically, the short story is about a sensibility that may be called transcendent, in its intensity, immediacy, and focus upon an authentic but unfamiliar self--and not subject to immediate closure, as implied by May's notion of defamiliarization--readers typically seem to anticipate a sense of storyness and closure (emotional closure, if not intellectual closure) at a story's ending (May, The New Short Story Theories xxii). Austin Wright

describes this kind of "open-ended story": "instead of being formless, as the term would suggest, [it] is recalcitrant in its rejection of conventional beginnings and ends, [and] is resolved by subtler notions of form" (119).

These "subtler notions of form" are what I (and most contemporary short story theorists) would call a story's formal elements--all elements of a story that contribute to our sense of its storyness, other than the primary element--the ending. Readers of stories apparently typically do not obtain immediate closure upon reading a story, as various short story theorists note, including John Gerlach, Charles E. May, Austin Wright, Susan Lohafer, Ian Reid, Valerie Shaw, and Mary Rohrberger, among others. Although Rorhberger agrees with Valerie Shaw, whom she quotes from The Short Story: A Critical Introduction: "The short story's success often lies in conveying a sense of unwritten, or even unwritable things: the story teller accepts the limitations of his art, and makes his freedom an aspect of those same restrictions" (263-64); Rohrberger also asserts that readers of these stories actively work to co-produce or "cocreate" the meaning within each story ("Between Shadow and Act" 43). Short stories are thus designed, especially those of a more "open" character, to require reader participation to locate the "unwritable things" as well as subtexts that convey thematic content, including that of the unconscious through accumulated metonymic details, which as May contends, "are transformed into metaphoric meaning" ("Reality" 374).

Rohrberger distinguishes between the "simple narrative" and "the short story proper," and makes claims for stories that are appropriate for considering Carver's stories as short stories:

> My own distinction between the simple narrative (I don't like the term, but have difficulties with all others, too) and the short story proper is founded mainly on the presence or absence of symbolic substructures. Both categories partake of the qualities of unity and coherence; but in the simple narrative interest lies primarily on [the] surface level. There are no mysteries to be solved, no depths to be plumbed. Meaning is apparent, easily articulated and accomplished by simple ironic reversals. This kind of "plot" story, "character" story, or "setting" story is mainly representational and linear. Readers feel an immediate feeling of satisfaction in completion of the form. The short story, on the other hand, leaves readers with a set of emotions that cannot be easily sorted; readers are often confused as to meaning and find it almost impossible to state them. In this kind of story, reader satisfaction must be postponed until questions presented by the symbolic substructures are answered. In this way the short story makes of readers cocreators, active participants in the revelation of meaning, and it is in this interaction that

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satisfaction ultimately rests. ("Between Shadow and Act" 43)

One of the most contentious questions regarding Carver's short stories is the degree to which Carver uses--or fails to use--formal elements of the story to allow readers to achieve some measure of closure. As noted above, a primary means for readers to obtain story closure is to allow themselves to imagine what Carver's characters are feeling and imagining in each story, and in each moment of crisis. What is "at risk" for each character? Horst Ruthrof suggests that readers can determine "the core situation of gravitational existential significance towards which the narrative material is organized" (he cites three situations: "final vision or revelation, rejection of false moral premises, and the gain of a state of authenticity"--typically, Carver's stories involve the first and third situations, whether realized or "de-realized" [102]). According to Ian Reid, a short story's text selectively focuses upon those moments for a character "when an individual is most alert or most alone" (28). Readers of stories thus are given foregrounded moments of an existential nature for characters.

Even so, as Rohrberger contends, such moments are not immediately clear (or open) to readers: not only are these emotions not "easily sorted," the other "meanings" of the story may be impossible to explain immediately afterwards (43). Readers must try to find closure--Dominic Head asserts, "a consciousness of closure is operative in all short stories, even

those which are open-ended" (194)--to satisfy their need to benefit from the conflicts and problems presented in the stories, so will also look to other formal elements of a story to do so. Valerie Shaw's description of the short story as an "impressionistic art . . . something complete yet unfinished" (13), underscores the implied role for readers to obtain story closure as a means by which stories are read--even as they find themselves engrossed by a story's openness.

Whether readers read a short story to openly explore, and sometimes resolve "our most urgent problems, even those we ordinarily shun," as Simon Lesser contends (55), or, as Luigi Pareyson affirms, to enter in to it as a means of personal "performance" (qtd. in Eco, The Role of the Reader 63); readers need to engage in a short story's tension between closure and nonclosure: the story needs to be suggestive yet deeply structured; informing, yet retaining a degree of mystery and ambiguity--all to more fully engage its readers.

What Ian Reid states about "some short stories," is actually applicable to most engaging stories: that (as Shaw asserts) they are "complete," yet until read and worked over in the imaginations of readers, "unfinished":

> Moreover, what makes some stories linger in the mind is that we are left uncertain about the nature and extent of the revelation, peak of awareness, that a character has apparently experienced. We sense that, while there has indeed been an important shift of

> perspective in her/his view of things, its significance may not yet have been fully apprehended by that character. (58)

Readers of short stories, then, sometimes have to work as detectives do (although if the stories' concerns did not affect them on such an imaginative level, as well, they might be read merely as puzzles). Great stories, however, do provide readers with the satisfactions of "symbolic" clues (or as Rohrberger describes them, "symbolic substructures"), using "symbol" to mean any word that allows people to develop--imaginatively and intellectually--as human beings.

Various critics find Carver's stories indeterminate, lacking sufficient closure, with endings that seem arbitrary or inconclusive. But some short story theorists underscore the point that Carver's stories actually do provide a measure of thematic closure, even if their endings do not typically give happy or tidy closure for a particular character. Short story theorists find that stories of quality require more from readers than simply attending to obvious expression of plot. Arthur Saltzman calls "the open-endedness or lack of resolution of his stories" one of "Carver's 'trademarks'" (13), and cites Carver's own comment from an interview with McCaffery and Gregory that "It would be inappropriate, and to a degree impossible, to resolve things neatly for these people in situations I'm writing about" (111). Carver adds, later in the same paragraph,

> On the other hand, I want to make certain my readers

> aren't left feeling cheated in one way or another when they've finished my stories. It's important for writers to provide enough to satisfy readers, even if they don't provide 'the' answers, or clear resolutions. (111)

Of course, Carver's stories are not all the same with respect to their endings. Some, such as "Errand," provide a pointed closure--even though the story suggests as much as it portrays--others, such as "Where I'm Calling From," may seem more tentative; while others, such as "Gazebo," may seem puzzling. Even so, all provide "clues" to allow closely engaged readers to gain a reasonable degree of closure, even though it may be true of Carver's stories, as Thomas Gullason claims, that "great stories provide more questions than answers" (229).

But in order to appreciate the story beneath the story and the questions a story presents, readers need to be able to begin to understand puzzling stories: if stories are too open-ended, they may resist a reader's expectations of closure; on the other hand, if stories are too closed, they disallow an engaging reading experience. Carver's stories can both engage readers, even after an initial reading, and provide tentative closure. Most do not provide full and immediate closure, but can provide greater closure for readers sometime after their initial reading, as readers work out their clues, details, and implications. In this way, in how they are read (processed) and structured, they exhibit a pronounced semiopenness.

Short stories also, according to May, accommodate a reader's sense of the mythic by remaining the genre "closest to the primal narrative form that embodies and recapitulates mythic perception" ("The Nature of Knowledge" 139). A story such as "The Cabin," which debunks Mr. Harrold's mythic sense of self, must first allow informing images, such as a poetically rendered landscape of the natural world to stir a reader's imagination and sensibilities. Carver's facility as a poet is evident here (Raymond Carver was awarded Poetry magazine's Levinson Prize in 1985 and authored six collections of poetry), and his prose, though firmly grounded in the real, suggests a mystical beauty--and presence--in Nature:

> Pine trees whose branches were heavy with snow stood on either side of the road. Clouds mantled the white hills so that it was hard to tell where the hills ended and the sky began. (Fires 145)

Likewise, "The Cabin" includes a mythic image of hunters, a primal, informing image in this story: "a big Frederic Remington representation hung on the wall at the far end of the room. You watched the lurching, frightened buffalo, and the Indians with drawn bows fixed at their shoulders" (146). The timelessness of this imagery is underscored by the drawn bows fixed to the shoulders of the Native American hunters, which while seen across the room, still helps to inform the moment when Mr. Harrold is caught or trapped in the river, his spirit hunted by the boy pointing a rifle towards his stomach "or else a little lower

down" (154).

Although the mythic spell of Mr. Harrold's world is debunked by his abandonment of his fishing rod--he really forgets about it as he is shocked and dislocated by his intense physical and psychological crisis--the story first requires a clear sense of this realm of myth, in order for readers to care about and empathize with Mr. Harrold: without this dimension (or sensibility) the story would lose its intensity for readers. May refers to the centrality of the heightening of a moment in which experience is concentrated ("The Nature of Knowledge" 139). When Mr. Harrold experiences himself as the object of this hunt, he, both biologically and psychologically, loses touch with his surroundings in a moment in which he imagines his death, a situation implied in the text but never stated. Mr. Harrold remains transfixed, unable to act normally: "Mr. Harrold nodded his head dreamily. He felt as if he wanted to yawn. He kept opening and closing his mouth" (155). Significantly, "The Cabin" concludes optimistically, unlike its prototype "Pastoral," with Mr. Harrold warming to the little fire that Mrs. Maye provides for him in his cabin stove, a reminder of human warmth (Meyer, Raymond Carver 116). I would add that this restoration of Mr. Harrold's sense of self by being symbolically reclaimed into the human family, represented by Mrs. Maye's fire, also works upon Mr. Harrold's subconscious: "He let the warmth gradually come back into his body. He began to think of home, of getting back there before dark" (156). The ending may also suggest that Mr.

Harrold's desire to return home before dark is prompted by the warming fire, an informing image of the story that also represents his unconscious desire for his wife. Although the nature of Mrs. Harrold's absence is presented ambiguously, readers can reasonably infer that Mr. Harrold clearly associates her with their home. The woodland cabin and its warming fire are informing metaphors for her and their home.

"The Cabin," read as Mr. Harrold's story, is both an existential narrative and an exploration into a mythic unconscious realm: it also reads as an aesthetic whole by using various distinct formal elements, including the foregrounding of its title, and by compressing a particular moment or "single point" of narrative, which according to Ernst Cassier, "is the prerequisite for all mythical thinking and mythical formulation" (qtd. in May, "The Nature of Knowledge" 139). As such, it is deeply constructed, both by the accretion of informing details and by its depth of psychological engagement for Mr. Harrold. As such, the story's imagery and narrative cohere and provide readers with a text that is open and easily readable. But it does provide sufficient ambiguity, with respect to the role of Mrs. Harrold and his relationship to her in the story (and the reasons why she doesn't go fishing with him now), to allow readers to continue to be engaged by it after the first reading. Likewise, readers may remain unsure just what the story tends to suggest about the role of Mr. Harrold as a "hunter" of fish: elements in the text tend to suggest that such a role is

"natural" in the natural world but that the contemporary human world makes such roles into a self-destructive sport (the threatening boys are also clearly disliked by Mrs. Maye, who accuses them of vandalizing her shed). However, this theme is also undercut by implying people like Mr. Harrold, who wish to escape back to a mythic past role--not just as a knight-errant but as a hunter--can never do so again.

In these ways, "The Cabin" invites new questions and provides readers with tentative closure but not final closure. Ewing Campbell maintains that Mr. Harrold's name recalls "the milieu within which everything occurs and evokes a long list of Norse and Saxon heroes who, like King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, ended their lives in defeat" (Raymond Carver 6). The camp's name, Castlerock, and the act of vandalism, which brands the boys a group of latter-day vandals, and Mr. Harrold's reveries as a knight-errant ("The sun and the sky come back to him now, and the lake with the lean-to" [151]) all cohere to deepen a reader's sense of Mr. Harrold's worldview and help to inform our reading of his story, as Campbell observes (6-7). While the story may suggest this milieu, Mr. Harrold's name may only be coincidentally related to King Harold, and calling the destructive boys vandals may add little to the story. Even so, such details may actually be linked within the story and affect a reader subconsciously; if so, they help to inform the aesthetic value of a story that is neither completely open nor completely closed; but is both clear on its surface and ambiguous and

suggestive below its surface.

The degree to which a story remains open or closed, and the manner in which it informs and coheres around a single compressed moment will vary from story to story in Carver's work. "Everything Stuck to Him" is an interesting frame story whose focal point in time is ostensibly when the boy accidentally turned his breakfast plate into his lap, so that "everything stuck to his underwear" (What 134). The man relates this, his own story, to his daughter. "Everything Stuck to Him" emphasizes this moment by its title. Although Carver's "Everything Stuck to Him" contains some omissions not found in "Distance" (in the original version in Furious Seasons or in the later published versions), the basic plot is similar to that of the original story; although, some important events are lacking (depicted below). Both the first and third versions emphasize the distance of time from that incident by the stories' titles. The word "distance" also recalls an experience of the young husband, which occurred soon after he had left to go hunting and several hours after he had talked to his wife about the fate of one of a pair of geese--just after the other had been shot ("I'd see another goose turn back from the rest and begin to circle and call over the goose that lay on the ground" Where 190):

> The temperature had dropped during the night, but the weather had cleared so that the stars had come out. The stars gleamed in the sky over his head. Driving, the boy looked out at the stars and was moved

when he considered their distance.

> Carl's porchlight [sic] was on, his station wagon parked in the drive with the motor idling. Carl came outside as the boy pulled to the curb. The boy had decided. (193)

The man at the story's close has obviously changed from who he once was: as he stares through the window and sees through the darkness the snow falling outside, and sees the girl's reflection in the glass as she studies her fingernails, he is no longer a naïve young man. The title "Distance" emphasizes, also, the distance the young man once felt between himself and the rest of the universe after fighting with his wife and looking out at the stars. Both scenes are metaphoric in their representation and psychological embodiment of that (early) potential, and (later) actual, loss of closeness. This is made clear by the boy's decision to forego the hunt and return to his wife and baby. He had told his wife that he would always try to shoot the bereaved goose circling his or her dead mate; looking at the stars and feeling alone, perhaps getting a premonition of loss, he returns to his mate as soon as he can. Carver's restoration of the title and missing scenes also gives "Distance" a depth and coherence "Everything Stuck to Him" lacks.

However, some readers looking for story closure in "Distance" may feel unsure about the focal point of this story. Some questions are left unexplained. Austin Wright comments that "Distance" is "a typical recent example of a story with an

unexplaining explanation" (125). Recalling that "in a story, everything should count" (123), Wright points out that

> the story seems intended to explain what went wrong in the marriage, yet in the anecdote, the couple, after a brief conflict, reconciles. The explanation does not explain. The reader is forced to fill in, to discover perhaps the narrator's regret and mourning for a naïve past when his problems seemed to have solutions. (125)

"Distance" provides for Wright the recalcitrance of an "unexplaining explanation"--one of five varieties of resistance Wright locates in stories, whose effect is to stop our automatic processing of them while slowing down and deepening our engagement with them. By having to work through such resistance, the story seems to forestall immediate semantic processing, but because readers are encouraged by the open nature of the story to remain engaged by it, this story and others like it allow readers to carefully read them and think about them, so that for these readers, such stories remain more open than closed. Other readers may locate more closure in "Distance."

Carver's story titles are among his most informing tropes. This kind of formal element may be employed in more than one way in a short story. In "Distance," "distance" not only refers to the boy's sense of potential abandonment and his feelings of diminishment in a vast universe; the narrator of his story, the man of twenty years later, looks back from a distance more significantly marked for him by a measure of psychological

distance than by time. An indication of this is that he refers to himself in his narrative simply as "the boy" and to his former wife as "the girl." The narrator emphasizes their loss of names by referring to each of the girl's sisters, whom he also found desirable, by name ("Sally was the girl's sister. She was ten years older. The boy was a little in love with her, just as he was a little in love with Betsy, who was another sister the girl had. He'd said to the girl, 'if we weren't married I could go for Sally'" [Where 189]). This "distant scene" of not naming a character has more than one implication, but one that fits the story is that the man wishes to objectify their story in his mind--to displace himself, perhaps in order to reintegrate his experiences then with his own now--or that the memories are so closely and disturbingly tied to his own psyche that to tell the story, he is compelled to find as much distance between then and "now" as possible.

But "distance" is also a reference, clearly presented in the story's subtext, to the "distance"--the emotional differences--between the boy and the girl. The boy is clearly infatuated with her and is immature, and their laughter over the spilt waffle, syrup, eggs, and bacon, and the spill itself, serve, as Adam Meyer observes, to remind the man that this "idyllic scene was fragile and destined to be short-lived" (Raymond Carver 108). Meyer cites the discussion about shooting the bereaved goose as a foreshadowing device, which it is; but the spill scene--as happy and relieving as it is--is really a more relevant and more

informing scene, one that is vividly re-envisioned by the narrator through a distance of time and experiences. The scene is powerful because it displaces, almost instantly, the obvious tension in the couple's uncertain and precarious relationship. Not only is the boy immature; the girl is immature, as well ("But who do you really love?" the girl asked. "Who do you love most in the world?" "Who's your wife?" "And will we always love each other?" the girl asked [189]). She is troubled by his desire to shoot geese and by his defensive reply ("You can't think about the contradictions" [190]); and more importantly, by his willingness to abandon his sick baby and upset wife. Readers who read between the lines (and who read the lines alone) can determine the fragility of a relationship in which the girl gives the boy an ultimatum:

> "You're going to have to choose," the girl said. "Carl or us. I mean it, you've got to choose."
>
> "What do you mean?" the boy said.
>
> "You heard what I said," the girl answered. "If you want a family you're going to have to choose."
>
> They stared at each other. (193)

Lastly, "distance" clearly underscores the distance between the man who narrates his story and his daughter, who is visiting him in Milan for Christmas. The omniscient narrator describes her as "a cool, slim, attractive girl, a survivor from top to bottom" (186). The man, after the conclusion of his narrative, observes her reflection in the window and sees her studying her

fingernails (197). When she does talk, she is "speaking brightly" and forcefully, but her father, almost a stranger now, is still caught up in his own narrative, and though he replies to her request to "show her the city. . . . [He] stays by the window, remembering that life" (197). The distance between father and daughter is underscored by his present reluctance to call her by name. Readers only learn about her name, and only once, from her mother, and in his narrative he calls her simply "the baby" (188).

Carver uses tropes carefully, such as in titles. Bill Delaney observes how titles such as "Fat," "Gazebo," "Vitamins," "Feathers," "Cathedral," "Boxes," and "Menudo" act as external symbols of characters' subjective states (439). Many titles are concise or incisive, a number are questions or one-word titles, and all carefully focus upon a story's thematic concerns to provide increasing coherence or complexity (as with "Distance"). For example, in "What's in Alaska?" Mary announces to Jack, at the story's beginning, that she may be accepting a job in Fairbanks, Alaska. This opportunity seems to be exciting to her as she intrudes on Jack while he is bathing, gives him a beer, then asks for his acceptance. (She nodded. "What do you think of that?" [Where 71]). But at the story's conclusion, she asks Jack, "What's in Alaska?" (85). The title question underscores her own transient focus upon their relationship. Her complaint to Carl and Helen, that "Jack's on a little bummer, tonight" appears to come from nowhere, and Jack responds, "Why do you say

that?" (73).

Although Carver's incorporation of humor throughout this story prevents it from being a darker drama, from Jack's point of view, it clearly suggests Mary's desire to leave Jack. Various clues about this are presented in the story, such as Jack noticing Mary and Carl in the kitchen: "He saw Mary move against Carl from behind and put her arms around his waist" (78). The answer to the title question, however, gives this story its focus: someone other than Jack. Rereading "What's in Alaska?" helps to confirm for readers the state of Mary and Jack's relationship by locating additional "clues," but the story's title is initially suggestive to readers of Carver's stories in locating overarching meaning.

The significance of names and naming in Carver's stories can scarcely be overemphasized. Characters who are belittled by others are given abbreviated names or nicknames; thus, the middle-aged man in "Why Don't You Dance?" is called "the old guy" (What 10). Likewise, Ross in "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit" is referred to as Mr. Fixit: "Mr. Fixit did okay for a little guy who wore a button-up sweater" (What 19). Also, in "The Calm," Charles, a guard, refers patronizingly to the deer he shot as "old Mr. Buck" (What 117), and thereby gives more force to the cruelty of his kill, which works as an informing image in this story.

In "One More Thing," L. D. 's reduced status in the story is marked by his abbreviated name. In "Feathers" Jack hangs up

the telephone on Olla because he cannot recall her name, and this failure "to connect" phatically foreshadows the failure of his marriage to Fran and their failure to become friends with Bud and Olla. Likewise, when Jack stops calling his wife "Swede," after she cuts her long, alluring hair, readers sense that the conclusion of the story will suggest that their relationship, too, has been severed.

Many readers are puzzled by the ending of "Gazebo"; however, knowing the importance names and naming have in Carver's stories, it is possible to give this seemingly wide-open and inconclusive ending a greater degree of closure, although, perhaps, not final closure. Of significance is the couple's phatic use of language and the role their names play in this usage. At the story's beginning, the first word of dialogue is Duane's: "Holly, this can't continue. This has got to stop." Holly replies, "Duane, this is killing me" (What 21). What is somewhat unusual in this first conversation is how each partner begins a spoken sentence using the other partner's first name. And, after Holly says, "I'm no good anymore," Duane just replies, "Holly" (22). Apparently, the inflected tone is meant to convey as much as the name itself, for Duane and Holly exchange each other's names throughout this short story: this is how they communicate. At one place, Holly's name is used to express missing dialogue, which for Holly and Duane is completely understood, for example:

> "I'm not talking crazy" she goes. "Nothing's crazy

about Nevada. You can stay here with your cleaning woman. I'm moving to Nevada. Either there or kill myself."

"Holly!" I go.

"Holly nothing!" she goes. (25)

Complementing such increasingly cryptic dialogue are instances between the couple of nonverbal communication: "She sets her lips and gives me her special look" (25). (Reading "Gazebo" is a lesson itself in close reading.) Again, Duane, the narrator, unintentionally recounts their own private use of language:

I don't have anything to say. I feel all out of words inside. I give her the glass and sit down in the chair. I drink my drink and think it's not ever going to be the same.

"Duane?" she goes.

"Holly?"

My heart has slowed. I wait. Holly was my own true love. (26)

Although it appears that Duane is a poor narrator; in fact, he clearly tells the implied reader some vital information. What is clear is that he addresses his reader differently than he does Holly, and may not want the reader to read his private dialogue too closely. He does leave readers "clues," however, as to the ending: "There was a funny thing of anything could happen now that we realized everything had" (27). Another clue given is his

narrative overview of his sexual encounter with Juanita, the woman who worked as a maid at the motel. He tells readers he "hadn't noticed the little thing before, though we spoke when we saw each other. She called me, I remember, Mister" (23). But after "one thing and another," their relationship changed in a distinctive way as soon as she called him by name: "She started calling me by name" (23). After their first meeting (when they were both working), Duane recalls, "She smiles and says my name. It was right after she said it that we got down on the bed" (23). Clearly, Duane is telling the reader about his own suggestibility and the effect hearing his name being called has for him, throughout this story, that he and Holly seemingly only have to say the other's name in order to communicate clearly to each other. At the story's conclusion, Duane tells the implied reader the following:

> I stay there. I pray for a sign from Holly. I pray for Holly to show me.
>
> I hear a car start. Then another. They turn on their lights against the building and, one after the other, they pull away and go out into the traffic.
>
> "Duane," Holly goes.
>
> In this, too, she was right. (29)

Recalling the emotional power hearing his name has on Duane, that this one word triggered his sexual arousal towards the maid, readers might conclude that "Duane"--in Duane's mind--stands for a request for lovemaking, although this cannot be

proven. Significantly, the story's beginning is equally ambiguous as to Holly's feelings: "That morning she pours Teacher's over my belly and licks it off. That afternoon she tries to jump out the window" (21). Recalling the story's beginning and reading about how Holly describes her feelings, readers might conclude that Holly either will leave Duane or make love to him. Because the story concludes at night (the cars pull away from the motel with their light on), and because of Duane's assertion that "anything could happen now," and because of his lack of expressed grief in his last statement ("In this, too, she was right"), readers might conclude that this story ends (as do some others) with an unnarrated but exciting act of lovemaking. The seemingly completely open ending of "Gazebo" is an extreme example of Carver's stories' endings that seem to preclude possibilities for closure (some critics, such as Adam Mars-Jones, Peter LaSalle, and John Aldridge strongly complain that Carver's stories' endings lack closure). But here, too, closure is possible, and, I would maintain, all of his other stories provide more clearly interpretable instances of story closure.

Various critics contend that Carver never uses metaphors in his stories. For example, Robert Towers asserts that Carver's "style is sternly denotative, allowing no scope for metaphor or linguistic exuberance" (37). William L. Stull's often-quoted description of Carver's typical stories as "elliptical, understated, and studiously opaque" suggests the same point ("Beyond Hopelessville" 1). Kirk Nesset's assertion that

"Carver's metaphors refute resemblance even as they seem to assert it, with likeness toned down to the point of denial" (44) is a familiar kind of comment one reads from many of Carver's critics. Nesset asserts that though readers may find metaphors--he lists the fat man in "Fat," the shiny convertible in "What Is It?" the steelhead in "Nobody Said Anything," the peacock in "Feathers," a broken icebox in "Preservation," and a cathedral in "Cathedral"--they lack sufficient metaphorical density and coherence. According to Nesset, although such informing images serve as tropes, they do not serve as metaphors (44-45).

But within the context of stories in which characters are highly imaginative, such informing images clearly act suggestively and metaphorically in the minds of these characters. In "Nobody Said Anything," what Nesset describes as a "sickly green steelhead" is much more in the eyes of the boy (as I have described above). Nesset comments that "while the fish tends to glow with tentative meaning, Carver the author chooses not to spell it all out" (44). But, again, Carver's method works better by not "spelling it all out," and so conveys a sense of wonder of Nature's processes for both the boy and the reader: both the boy and the image (as indicated earlier) seem transfigured in the last scene: in fact, the boy <u>holds up</u> this mythic image--no longer green now, but "look[ing] silver under the porch light" (<u>Where</u> 20). Nesset's assertion regarding Carver's use of informing metaphoric images, that "whatever connections are to be made Carver implies, we must make for ourselves" (44), fails to

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recognize their resonance for Carver's characters.

William Delaney mentions two objects that act as metaphors: the bridle in "Bridle" and cardboard boxes in "Boxes." In "Bridle," Delaney asserts:

> The naïve narrator does not understand the significance of the bridle but the reader feels its poignancy as a symbol. The bridle is one of those useless objects that everyone carts around and is reluctant to part with because it represents a memory, a hope, or a dream. (441)

Yet, Marge, the manager of the motel and narrator of this story, is a highly imaginative character. She also seems fascinated by the Holitses, who have driven from Minnesota in an old station wagon to her and her husband's motel (somewhere in Arizona). She receives their payment in cash ("U.S. Grants"), and after noticing Mr. Holits carrying in a bridle, she, lacking as she says, anything to do, writes her name in ink on each bill:

> [across] Grant's broad old forehead: MARGE. I print it. I do it on every one. Right over his thick brows. People will stop in the midst of their spending and wonder. Who's this Marge? That's what they'll ask themselves, Who's this Marge? (Cathedral 192)

This story is fully developed and narrated, and when Marge goes to check and clean the Holitses' motel unit after their departure, she notices the bridle left behind. Just as when she

was marking up the "U.S. Grants," she now speculates about whether it was left behind accidentally or on purpose, and describes it, its use, and how it might feel if a person were to experience it as a horse would:

> The rider pulls the reins this way and that, and the horse turns. It's simple. The bit's heavy and cold. If you had to wear this thing between your teeth, I guess you'd catch on in a hurry. When you felt it pull, you'd know it was time. You'd know you were going somewhere. (207)

Again, a story's informing object works to transform a character's imagination, and here it serves to emphasize Marge's feelings about her not going anywhere, of being stranded with an oblivious husband ("He acts like nothing has happened or ever will happen" [207]). Marge understands, feels deeply, and imagines what it might seem like to go someplace and do something interesting and different. Just before she describes her marking up the fifty-dollar bills, Marge tells the implied reader "All I know about Las Vegas is what I see on TV--about enough to put into a thimble" (192). Because of her imagination and strong desire for a fuller life, such an object symbolizes a hope for a significant change in her life.

In "Boxes," the narrator's mother's situation is the opposite, in some ways. The informing image of cardboard boxes underscores her lonely, transient, and disturbed lifestyle, moving from place to place and never finding the means to get

along successfully with others, including her son (the narrator), who seems unable to help her "settle down." Delaney sees these boxes as a metaphor for homeless people of different kinds, including those "who are considered by some to be useless in their old age and a burden to their children" (442).

Ewing Campbell points out the "implied metaphor of the father's adultery" in "Sacks" (Raymond Carver 33), and readers of the story may recall that the affair began with this informing object ("this little paper sack" What 39), and the story ends with the narrator recalling how he left his sack of gifts on the bar (45). The forgotten gift sack serves as a means for readers to remember the adulterous father, even though for the son, the narrator, its power of suggestion, that he has abandoned his father--which, for readers, is evident in the story--is repressed; instead, he uses it to complain about his wife's weight problem (45). Carver's use of objects is almost always careful and purposeful, and helps to inform the thoughts and feelings of his imaginative characters; likewise, imagery in Carver's stories is often compelling for characters and readers.

In "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" disturbing feminine images haunt Ralph, the cuckolded husband, who after learning from Marian about her past infidelity, leaves his home, gets drunk, and acts out his repressed former alter-ego, "Jackson." In the ending, Ralph returns to purposefully seek to connect with Marian once again--physically and imaginatively--from a deeper sense of self (one that has been reintegrated). Campbell

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observes how such a shock of realization of his primal desires works to dissociate Ralph, and in so doing, his formerly suppressed imagination explodes:

> His imagination, dormant for so long, invests otherwise innocent sounds and objects with the power to accuse: traffic proclaims his cuckoldry; a rack of antlers confronts him with deception. His measurement of himself is displaced by suffering, and for the first time in his life, Ralph Wyman is alive. (Raymond Carver 29)

What binds this story together, giving it coherence, is Ralph's disturbed imagination, which is hallucinatory in its effect on him. Dorothy Wickenden makes a related and an important point about Carver's stories: "These characters don't merely observe and exist; they actively suffer" (38). Carver's imagery in this story is surreal, and the intensity of such imagery, a manifestation of Ralph's highly charged imagination, gives attention to Ralph's suffering: the conflict of the story is internal and psychological. Even though Ralph gets mugged, and lies sprawled on the pavement, his suffering is internal, as he is forced to acknowledge his own fear of his wife's sexuality:

> "Why did you, Marian?" he asked. She shook her head without looking up. Then suddenly he knew! His mind buckled. For a minute he could only stare dumbly at his hands. He knew! His mind roared with the knowing. (Will? 238)

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As Campbell comments, Ralph's highly charged imagination invests otherwise innocent objects with a disturbing power. The accumulated number of them also gives this story a strangeness within a formerly familiar and an ordinary setting, which Stull calls Carver's "trademark." But Carver's intensity of imagery actually precludes any such synthesis: Ralph is transformed by his experiences after learning of his cuckoldry, and these surreal images move his psyche in an ominous and disturbing manner. Not only does he imagine--the subtext being in italics--himself striking his wife; he is terrified by surreal imagery, and especially, for him, a suggestive "emasculating" series of feminine images. He is "disturbed" by seeing Marian's "breasts pushing against the white cloth" of her blouse in Mexico, "an intensely dramatic moment into which Marian could be fitted but he could not" (229). When leaving a bar, during his nighttime carousal, Ralph sees a "woman toss her hair as she got into the car: He had never seen anything so frightening" (240). The scene of Ralph feeling himself about to vomit, and his "remembering" Marian's surreal presence, is a blending of images sexual and violent.

Surreality, as an evil presence, fills Ralph's imagination as he stares at his tablecloth with its tiny black coaches; and after he returns from his nighttime carousal, and showers, and looks at "the clipper ships making their way across the wide blue sea of the plastic shower curtain," and remembers the little black coaches on the tablecloth, he almost cries out "Stop!"

(250). Carver's use of informing imagery works to objectify--and sometimes transform--the subjective selves of his character, and, as such, works to inform an imaginative subtext in the minds of readers. Such imagery may work, seemingly, independently of the narrative events presented, as the coaches and clipper ships in "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" which may be reminders for Ralph of the car in which Marian cuckolded him; although such powerful imagery may seem inconclusive for readers, their affect upon a character can give readers an insight into a character's psyche. In so doing, Carver invites readers to first connect with the imaginative subtext, then to reprocess and speculate upon the narrative portion of the story, giving the story greater depth and significance for readers. Julio Cortázar describes the role of informing imagery: to help engender an intensity and a tension in stories, "like a dynamic vision that spiritually transcends the camera's field of vision," with its tension being there "from the first words or first scenes" (28, 29). This recalls Carver's own method of beginning a story: with an evocative phrase or image incorporated into a story's formal elements to give readers and characters a feeling of coherence and sense of storyness.

Other informing images that work upon characters in a transforming manner, preserving for these characters a "memorable moment," include the ugly baby, a plaster cast of teeth, and the peacock in "Feathers" for Fran--even though the change in their relationship came after "the kid had come along, all of that,

Fran would look back on that evening at Bud's place as the beginning of the change" (Where 354): Indeed, these images seem to take a strong hold upon Fran's psyche:

> "Goddamn these people and their ugly baby," Fran will say, for no apparent reason, while we're watching TV late at night. "And that smelly bird, she'll say. "Christ, who needs it!" Fran will say. She says this kind of stuff a lot, even though she hasn't seen Bud and Olla since that one time. (354-55)

In other stories, one object or image plays a dominating, informing role in a character's imagination; some examples include: a vacuum cleaner in "Collectors"; Dummy's drowned corpse in "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off," (which immediately prompts the narrator's father to tell his son: "Women. . . . That's what the wrong kind of woman can do to you, Jack" [211]).

In "Are These Actual Miles?" the informing image in Lee's mind is not just a disappearing convertible; rather it is Toni's stretch marks, which refer back to the title, and, imaginatively juxtaposed with the one shiny car, metaphorically question the fidelity and "value" of Leo's mate, and the value of his own life, which he has spent with her over a period of time:

> They are like roads, and he traces them, in her flesh. He runs his fingers back and forth, first one, then another. They run everywhere in her flesh, dozens, perhaps hundreds of them. He remembers waking up the

> morning after they bought the car, seeing it, there in the drive, in the sun, gleaming. (Where 137-38)

Other transforming images in Carver's stories include Susan Miller's floating, naked corpse, especially for Claire, in "So Much Water So Close to Home," provoking Claire to try to reestablish her relationship with her husband. "Menudo" and "Intimacy" contain autumn imagery of fallen leaves, leaves that signify the passage of time and the need of the protagonists to "move forward" in their lives before they each conclude prematurely.

Various other images inform Carver's stories, some of which require that readers work through their implications. For example, in "Where I'm Calling From," readers may wonder whether or not the narrator/protagonist will succeed in surviving the threatening cold of alcoholic withdrawal and isolation, metaphorically detailed in Jack London's "To Build a Fire": most critics suggest that he will. Even so, the metaphorical image means more to the narrator than just a "story": life or death, growth or withdrawal, hang in the balance. Such images are compelling for Carver's characters, who because of their active imaginations, serve to give coherence to their individual stories and, thereby, help to structure each narrative, giving each the status of an open--and engaging--story.

One final element that Carver uses effectively to help to frame or inform his stories, in order to give them a greater sense of storyness, is his use of light and darkness. Readers

may be surprised to know that over half of his stories' conclusions take place at night. Not only does this technique give a sense of closure or unity to many stories; the dark settings, even when the scenes are indoors, give such stories a special stillness or vibrancy: characters (and readers) are more suggestible at night, a period just before sleep, when their conscious minds rest, while their subconscious minds are more active, especially during dream states.

Special scenes in darkness gain power for characters and for readers. For example, in "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off," the view inside Dummy's barrels full of baby bass is primal in its presentation of the potency of these living beings. The mystery of life itself is suggested by their furious and ongoing swimming in the darkness--underscoring, as well, the contrast between Dummy's fertile pond and his own unfruitful and troubled marriage (which leads to his murder of his wife and his suicide): "a million bass fingerlings were finning inside. It was the strangest sight, all those live things busy in there, like a little ocean that had come on the train" (Where 201). In "I Could See the Smallest Things," Nancy, the narrator, who is awakened by the sound of her gate, goes to her window and beholds a familiar scene transformed by moonlight:

> There was light enough so that I could see everything in the yard--lawn chairs, the willow tree, clothesline strung between the poles, the petunias, the fence, the gate standing wide open.

> But nobody was moving around. There were no scary shadows. Everything lay in moonlight, and I could see the smallest things. The clothespins on the line, for instance. (What 31).

The special surreal quality such a scene evokes in Nancy's mind also stirs her imagination. Outside, in Sam's yard, Nancy observes a plane flying overhead, and envisions the scene inside the cabin: (I imagined the people on it sitting belted in their seats, some of them reading, some of them staring down at the ground [34]). Later, after returning to bed, she notices some dribbled saliva coming from Cliff's mouth (whom she tries again to waken), which she associates with the slimy slugs Sam was poisoning.

Much of the menace that Carver's characters face is often associated with changes in light and darkness. Insomnia, fatigue, anxiety about her marriage, and nightmares plague Nan in "The Student's Wife." Her psychological tension leaves her on her knees by the time morning arrives, begging God to help her and her husband. What would ordinarily be a calming or refreshing morning is menacing to her: no sunrise she had ever seen or read about "was as terrible as this" (Where 42). Even within her bedroom, the light is disturbing to her as she beholds her husband in sleep: "He looked desperate in his heavy sleep, his arms flung out across her side of the bed, his jaws clenched. As she looked, the room grew very light and the pale sheets whitened grossly before her eyes" (43).

Menace, as a threat to the psyche, is often typically associated with oncoming darkness or with darkness itself: most young children, at some point, are afraid of the dark, and images shown in darkness usually have the potential to appear more threatening. In "What's in Alaska?" Jack's heart turns as he thinks he sees a pair of small eyes looking his way from the darkened hallway.

In "So Much Water So Close To Home," the flashlights of the fishermen, whose light beams "play over the girl's body" (as well as their leaving her tethered nude corpse facedown in the river for two days while they got drunk, told coarse stories, and caught fish), underscores for Claire their male callousness (Furious Seasons 43-44). Claire recalls another victim murdered near the town where she grew up when she was a girl, whose image is reflected, perhaps, in Claire's last words in this version--and in Carver's final version in Where I'm Calling From :"For God's sake, Stuart, she was only a child" (61). Learning that the fishermen found her at night helps to fix this image, I suspect, more disturbingly in Claire's imagination.

Carver uses diminished natural light to underscore a shift of tone or mode in stories, also. In "Chef's House," the idyllic summer setting, in which Wes and Edna try to live as husband and wife again after Wes's "recovery" from alcoholism, has an oceanfront view and the rousing smell of salt air. But with the fall afternoon clouds that "hung over the water" comes bad news for the couple. After giving up hope because he is asked to

leave the borrowed house, Wes closes the drapes inside, signaling his withdrawal, again, into alcoholism, because, unlike Edna, he lacks a necessary belief in his own possibilities for growth: "Wes got up and pulled the drapes and the ocean was gone just like that" (Where 302).

In "Popular Mechanics," the actual scene of a baby being torn apart is never actually presented, but the story recalls Solomon's decision (in 1 Kings 3) to give to the just woman her baby by threatening to divide it; although, as Norman German and Jack Bedell observe, "In Carver's story, the baby's welfare is obviously not the 'issue'" (259). The growing darkness in which this story takes place and the snow melting into dirty water inform the tone within the scene: dark and ominous. German and Bedell contend that "What was snowy pure is now corrupt" (259). Not only do the parents become more upset toward each other, with their raised voices; the other "meteorological metaphor" of streaks of dirty water running down from a window that faced the backyard helps to inform the mood of this story of angry and corrupted characters' sensibilities (260).

"Intimacy" is another story with a mythic quality about it, according to Ewing Campbell (Raymond Carver):

> [the writer-narrator] goes to his knees and, like the diseased men of Gennesaret seeking wholeness by touching the hem of Christ's garment, grasps the hem of her dress, refusing to let go. It is in such gestures that Marilynne Robinson finds "the germ of

> myth and archetype" within Carver's fiction [35]. His act also reminds us of Jacob refusing to release the angel until he is blessed. "It's crazy, but I'm still on my knees holding the hem of her dress. I won't let go. I'm like a terrier, and it's like I'm stuck to the floor. It's like I can't move" [Where, 451]. (73-74)

Campbell also notes the presence of autumn leaves as symbols of loss: "lost youth, lost love, lost lives--and Carver's late fiction makes use of this tradition, but with a twist. In his work, leaves also engender guilt" (72). Campbell adds that at the story's conclusion, the narrator complains that "'Somebody ought to get a rake and take care of this' [Where 453], as if these leaves are the scattered remnants of an intimacy that could be gathered up and restored or, at least put into some sort of order" (72). Campbell may well be correct about this element of the narrator's guilt being imaginatively associated with the fallen leaves. In the fourth-to-the-last paragraph, however, the narrator comments about the morning light:

> So she walks me to the front door, which has been standing open all this while. The door that was letting in light and fresh air this morning, and sounds off the street, all of which we had ignored. I look outside and, Jesus, there's this white moon hanging in the morning sky. I can't think when I've

> ever seen anything so remarkable. But I'm afraid to comment on it. I am. I don't know what might happen. I might break into tears even. I might not understand a word I'd say. (452)

Carver's use of informing light gives this story's conclusion a hopeful quality, as with other stories in his later period that end in morning scenes ("Menudo" and "Elephant"). Unlike so many stories that end with characters in darkness, some joy has been revealed to these characters, and for readers. The primary affect that light has upon human beings, once the province of the unconscious, is now also being studied scientifically (phototherapy increasingly is being used to cure fatigue and depression, for example). Light itself--and light's absence--are among the most powerful images and symbols in human experience. (Art, religion, literature, and science are all closely associated with its ramifications.) Carver's sensitive use of light and darkness works upon his characters' subconscious imaginations and helps to inform stories, as well as to frame them. Thus, readers see how Carver's focus is not looking upon characters externally, per se (photo-realistically), but rather looking within them, locating their stories within them as "people."

Regarding Carver's use of symbolism in "A Small, Good Thing," Kathleen Westfall Shute's essay "Finding the Words: The Struggle for Salvation in the Fiction of Raymond Carver" details how grieving parents, grieving over the death of their innocent

son, find a means "of salvation through communion" (126) with the formerly ominous baker, who offers them some comfort, and, in the process, achieves some relief of his own. As Shute observes, the baker breaks open the heavy bread "like the Eucharist" (126). Readers of this story will also note the comforting early morning light ("the high, pale cast of light in the windows"), which like the sweet rolls and warmth within the bakery, give the Weisses a means of comfort (for both their hearts and spirits).

In "Cathedral," a kind of story closure is obtained, paradoxically, by the narrator no longer feeling enclosed with his house: "I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything" (Where 375). The liberating feeling of helping to imaginatively construct a cathedral by putting his hand to work to draw one, and Robert (a blind man) following his progress and, at the end, actually placing his fingers on top of the narrator's fingers, underscore a point Robert makes: "What's a cathedral without people?" (374). In this scene, the blind man helps the narrator to see how such meaningful structures can liberate oneself from the imaginative confines of selfishness (the narrator's wife even tells him that he does not have any friends [359]).

The symbolic act of building by drawing allows the narrator to understand something about his world that he had not realized before: the liberating power of friendship and the subsequent release from self-imprisonment. The ending here is semiopen, for although the narrator gains some measure of closure with Robert

and is realizing other dimensions to his social world (the story also suggests a spiritual awakening through communion), he is free to explore his imagination more deeply. Likewise, readers may imagine his psychological "release," yet still need to ask more questions about this story. Readers know the narrator's world is changing, even though he has difficulty telling the implied reader his state of sensibilities: "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything. 'It's really something,' I said." (375).

Carver's stories also really provide "something"--namely, storyness. Storyness, as described by Gerlach and others above, is also an interactive process between characters' imaginative internal and external worlds, giving coherence for readers by informing formal elements. In such stories, characters' desires and imaginations lead them to explore their worlds, in which they can also receive a measure of psychological closure. Carver's stories allow us to come closer to the story "below the surface" with each reading, exploring more deeply a character's desires and psyche. In this process, these fictive constructs become increasingly open to us psychologically; likewise, by rereading, we may obtain an increasing measure of story closure, if not ultimate closure.

Chapter 5

CARVER'S MORAL VISION AND HIS SEMIOPEN SHORT STORIES

In "Reality in the Modern Short Story," Charles E. May notes how "in the realistic short story, metonymic details are transformed into metaphoric meaning by the thematic demands of the story that organize them by repetition and parallelism into meaningful patterns" (374). Of course, the author of such stories must be selective in choosing some details to present while ignoring or omitting others, which might detract from a central theme or imaginative impression. Carver's use of objectification and selection of informing images are examples of metonymic detail and formal elements that do this.

May also maintains that

> the unified tone of the short story suggests that by breaking into the temporal flow of life and infusing it with the perspective of the talker, the realistic short story creates not a "slice of life" (which suggests an arbitrary delimitation), but rather a subjectively charged experience motivated by the teller's need to discover and reveal meaning. The problem for the writer then becomes how to transform a series of real events into something more than mere events, something that has meaning. Although

> generally the realists rejected the Emersonian belief that every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact, short-story realists still insisted that natural facts arranged within an aesthetic pattern can resonate with meaning. Thus, in the modern short-story, the only order possible is aesthetic order, and the only resolution possible is aesthetic resolution. It is as if short story writers, while dismissing the supernatural as unknowable, focus on another kind of unknowable: the unsolvable and unsayable elements of idealized human desire. (375)

May includes Carver as such a realist, whom he describes with Chekov and Hemingway, as being writers who self-consciously are practitioners of these characteristics:

> a literary technique that insists on compression, a rhetorical method that reveals meaning by leaving things out, and a language style that creates metaphor by means of metonymy. Moreover, all three authors attempt to express inner reality by describing outer reality, and frequently thematize the human dilemma of trying to say the unsayable (369).

May's analysis is more insightful than most any other regarding Carver's method and structuring of story, particularly with regard to his use of objectification to display inner desire. (After all, from a person's behavior, we might infer his or her desires. Also, a person's possessions--such as the

middle-aged man's records and furniture in "Why Don't You Dance?"--can also help to inform readers about his or her state of mind.) However, it is doubtful if a first person narrator would by himself or herself be such an "artist" as to provide an aesthetic resolution to his or her experiences or even to an experience--the typical focus of a short story. Although, Carver's narrators do, in the process of their narratives, explore their own desires and the implications of these.

Looking at "Errand," for instance, Carver's last story--a tribute to Chekov and a premonition, perhaps, of his own death from cancer--Carver joins an original historical account to his own fictive narrative, both of which are woven together as one and written, as Campbell asserts, "in the articulate idiom of the historian with complete sentences, elevated diction, scholarly coherence, and omniscient authority" (Raymond Carver 83). Because the narrator is omniscient, readers might look to the various characters to get a sense of their stories. And critical readers do realize that Chekov's death and the resultant errand that the young waiter is asked to perform shifts the focus of the story: whose story is it? Although, in a sense, it is everyone's story--Chekov is both a literary and historical figure--it is also the story of an "everyman": the waiter, whose imagination is stirred by his noticing a cork lying inappropriately on the floor. The final action of the story takes place with the waiter inconspicuously covering and removing the offending object: "Without looking down, he reached out and closed it into his

hand" (Where 526). The action is Carverian in its appropriateness and as a dignified gesture toward his character(s). The waiter pays his own respect to Chekov nonverbally.

But what are readers to make of the momento mori of the story? At Chekov's moment of death, a large, black-winged moth flies into the room through a window and bangs wildly against the electric lamp; shortly after the doctor leaves the room, the replaced cork pops out of the champagne bottle, and the champagne spills over. Dr. Schwöhrer's diagnosis of death, at three in the morning, while waiting for Chekov to show a pulse after looking at the second hand of his watch go around three times, included with the other metaphors noted, seem symbolically ritualistic, and improbable as real events. What subjective consciousness is being objectified here? How can the boy's gestures be made a part of an aesthetic whole with those of the other characters and informing objects (and the moth)? The text suggests the presence of a spiritual or mystic dimension by these successive events, and a moral dimension by the waiter's gesture. In this way, the story seems, inexplicably, to suggest two realms: the "ordinary" or everyday world and the world of spirit or myth, both of which, from time to time, intersect.

In my reading of Carver's stories, they do seem to embody two traditionally distinct ways of describing the world: first, Carver's stories focus on their characters' desires. Presumably, these would move the characters about, until, eventually, they

became engaged in conflicts, which they would try to resolve. But short story theorists have pointed out how and the extent to which contemporary stories may be almost exclusively about a character's inner reality; stories may even defy clear and easy interpretation because of this reality. Carver's stories respect characters as "people"; they are, in Carver's words, "recognizably human." Indeed, Carver's focus throughout his writing career has been to use short stories to investigate his characters in depth and let them explore their own unconscious and conscious desires. Short story theorists underscore that the genre of the short story allows characters, by virtue of a crisis or other intense or significant experience, to express these primal desires.

Carver's stories describe these desires and inner realities, but also they suggest a depth of psychological resolution possible for characters: psychological growth. In other words, this psychological maturation is something not described in any detail by short story theorists, almost all of whom stress the open or impressionistic nature of stories, that such coherence as exists in stories is provided aesthetically, by the genre's brevity, and so forth, and by their effect upon a reader's imagination and intellect. I am not suggesting here that short story theorists, such as May or Gullason and others, do not allow for epiphanic endings, in which characters--as well as readers--gain some insights or, more typically, strong impressions about their lives or experiences, although relatively

few contemporary short stories end this way (Thomas M. Leitch remarks that "[r]eaders . . . search in vain through their weekly issues of the New Yorker for stories that actually tell a story" [131]). Rather, my point here is that Carver's stories provide a process of "guided closure" for readers to discern moral dimensions within his stories and that as characters are impelled by their desires, they are also acting in a fictive but moral world in which their desire to connect with others allows them possibilities for personal growth. Carver presents to readers characters who struggle to "move forward" to achieve better relationships with others, and these struggles have a moral aspect to them, for they involve the whole lives of his fictive "people."

Carver's semiopen texts provide for possibilities for a kind of closure not mentioned by May and others, but important for characters and readers alike: moral growth or closure. Carver seems to suggest in his stories that although characters can obtain meaning from their experiences, it is not the kind of meaning that relates to aesthetics--other than in a tangential way. Their concerns are not textual--and it is their concerns Carver's stories return to. Carver's stories seem to demonstrate how human desire is a necessary if not sufficient condition for moral growth and how characters, simply put, need the trust and love of others.

In Carver's later stories, in particular, readers observe how characters grow as they reach out to others. For example, in

"Fever" the omniscient narrator begins the story by informing the reader that "Carlyle [the protagonist] was in a spot. He'd been in a spot all summer, since early June when his wife had left him" (Where 303). Carlyle's problem, it seems, has to do with finding a good babysitter now that Eileen, his former wife, has left him and their children. But Carlyle's resentment towards Eileen's abandonment grows, along with his real problems in finding a sitter; he finds kindly Mrs. Webster, whose conversation and care for him and his children he especially appreciates when he becomes ill with a fever and is forced to remain in bed, unable to care for them or himself.

Mrs. Webster listens to Carlyle's story as a mother or grandmother might, for Carlyle's psychological state is that of a hurt child or adolescent: "Carlyle was afraid she'd move into the other room and leave him alone. He wanted to talk to her" (329). Just after he begins his story about his life with Eileen, Mrs. Webster pats his hand, a comforting gesture for a child, and she tells him, "There, it's all right" (329). In telling his story to a willing listener, Carlyle is re-visioning his past experiences, his story being a "revision" of his experiences (a "looking again" at them). In the process, Carlyle acts to relieve himself of his past and present anxieties; the storytelling is a necessary component of his catharsis, his release from the pain Eileen's loss had caused him. When he says good-bye to Mrs. Webster, waving good-bye to her, it is as though he were saying--at long last—"good-bye" to his former wife:

> It was then, as he stood at the window, that he felt something come to an end. It had to do with Eileen and the life before this. Had he ever waved at her? He must have. Of course, he knew he had, yet he could not remember just now. But he understood it was over, and he felt able to let her go. He was sure their life together had happened in the way he said it had. But it was something that had passed. And that passing--though it had seemed impossible and he'd fought against it--would become a part of him now, too, as surely as anything else he'd left behind. (331)

In other stories, sympathetic listeners allow protagonists to grow as "people" as they connect with others. In "Cathedral," Robert, a friend of the protagonist's wife, is troubling to the narrator protagonist because he is blind and because Robert has known her for years, the implications being that Robert knows his wife in ways he does not (his wife tells him about how she met Robert, how he "read" her face with his fingers, and that they had been exchanging letters and telephone conversations for years). But the insecure and withdrawn narrator begins to enjoy Robert's conversation and company. In this process, the narrator opens up to Robert and is prompted to suggest drawing a cathedral--something Robert cannot accurately envision. The two men work together to draw a cathedral, and by conversing and by imagining and talking about the cathedral

(being discussed on a television program), they create a dramatic scene:

> I put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses. I hung great doors. I couldn't stop. The TV station went off the air. I put down the pen and closed and opened my fingers. The blind man felt around over the paper. He moved the tips of his fingers over the paper all over what I had drawn, and he nodded. (Where 373-74)

But Robert and the narrator go on to complete the drawing, with Robert's fingers on top of his, almost guiding him; as the narrator draws the people inside, Robert comments, "I think that's it. I think you got it. Take a look. What do you think?" (374). Clearly, the narrator's concern for Robert's knowing what a cathedral looks like allows this character, whom his wife says doesn't have "any friends" (359), to become friendly to Robert and to "open up" to the outside world. Robert--like Mrs. Webster in "Fever," and the baker in "A Small, Good Thing," and a former forgiving wife in "Intimacy," and the narrator's childhood memory of his father in "Elephant"--works as a mediator for a protagonist, who tells his or her story, in order to heal recent or past emotional traumas or just to bring release from a state of isolation or withdrawal. When, at the conclusion to "Cathedral," the narrator exclaims that his eyes were closed, but he thought that he would keep them that way for a little longer, that it was something he felt he "ought to do,"

readers understand that his sensibility has shifted from what he can do or enjoy--smoke marijuana, watch television, drink, and so forth--to what he should do. In the process of opening up to Robert, the narrator no longer feels enclosed within his own limited world, inside his house: "'My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything. It's really something,' I said" (375).

Carver's stories are semiopen in that his characters have free will, but it is up to them to "move forward" to exercise it or not, and to look for like characters to listen to and talk to (especially, for alcoholics) and to tell their stories to: increasingly, to obtain this connectedness or closure with others. Carver's stories are studies in moral development through their characters' successful or unsuccessful exploration of human desire that affirms each life and loving interaction with others; Carver's stories embody what some might call a humanist perspective. William L. Stull mentions that "Love has been the overarching subject of Carver's stories" ("Beyond" 11), and I would certainly agree. Carver's later stories also seem, in places, to underscore a spiritual dimension to this moral growth. As in "Fever," "Cathedral," and "A Small, Good Thing"--stories in which, significantly, prayers are involved--individual characters can grow morally and spiritually with others to help them, but they also must first be trying to do so. Experiences of characters within stories become meaningful for them (and for readers) as they become vehicles for the exaltation and

intensification of human desire: allowing characters to move toward connecting with others, to live more compassionately, while simultaneously growing as mature human beings. Even so, just as Carver sees such stories as describing a process of "forward movement" or personal growth, they do not provide final closure, but imaginatively offer room for continued growth (a process itself, in biological and psychological terms, involving both openness and closure).

Victoria Aarons comments that Carver's characters fail to grow or move forward because of their failures of communication (and some other critics have said much the same thing). Aarons observes that although they generally fail in this, and that Carver's stories thereby lack resolution, readers admire their attempts: "Despite their inability to connect with others, the characters' determination to voice their feelings--and thus give them meaning and validity--surprisingly redeems them" (150). And Aarons adds that a reader's identification with Carver's characters and events gives the stories an important verisimilitude, one that holds the reader's avid attention throughout the collection (150).

Certainly, because Carver focuses upon his characters' desires, readers will seek to identify or empathize with them. But even in What We Talk About, some characters do move forward and obtain some small measure of growth by listening to and communicating with others. For a brief moment, the middle-aged man in "Why Don't You Dance?" gets some satisfaction and comfort

in seeing this couple drink and dance, and readers may suspect this to be a small comfort, which may be better than none at all for him. In "Viewfinder" the formerly immobilized homeowner asserts himself and releases pent-up hostility in a manner, perhaps, cathartic. In "Gazebo," Holly was "right" about calling Duane's name again at the story's end, which possibly leads to their reconciliation. In "The Calm," after listening to different people in the barber shop, the narrator experiences a calm at the story's conclusion after making up his mind to leave Crescent City, California. Lastly, in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the narrator learns some things about love that are significant: that it is more than an idea, and that it may be easier to feel than to define.

The process of storytelling, in which one tells a story to another person, allows the teller to also tell himself or herself about his or her own desires and conflicts. Not completely different from dreaming, in which one tells a story to oneself in a more imaginative way, both are related to the short story proper, which underscores their similarities. This process of storytelling allows narrators of a recent past to build upon their lives (such as the waitress to the fat man in "Fat"); or allows them to review the past to try to reconstruct a future (such as the narrators of "Feathers," "Fever," "Where I'm Calling From," or "Nobody Said Anything").

As mentioned earlier, many of Carver's characters are alcoholic, and, consequently, it seems, withdrawn from others.

Male loneliness and feelings of loss of manhood are also related themes. Reamy Jansen observes:

> Society no longer embodies a sense of the past, and the sense of retrospect that fiction traditionally offers us seems no longer possible. The contemporary short story articulates this loss of the integrated self, this sense of marginality. (394)

In Intimacy and Identity, William Kilpatrick asserts that male-female relationships have suffered because males increasingly have been focused upon the present to the exclusion of a purposeful future (99). Kilpatrick also asserts that adding to this problem, for males without strong fathers, and without fathers, generally, is the increasingly matriarchal character of contemporary American culture, its concurrent tribalism, and its increasing violence (157,152). Kilpatrick concludes: "The important thing is that one has a sense of being involved in history and in the future" (191). If Carver's male characters, especially those who have withdrawn, have trouble freeing themselves from their limiting--but protecting--worlds, Kilpatrick might assert that the culture has contributed to their problems. Carver writes about men unemployed, who passively wait for mail (job offers) that never comes, and about male characters whom their wives sometimes verbally abuse. But Carver also writes about characters who confront their circumstances by connecting with others and by "reconnecting" with themselves--by reintegrating themselves through shared storytelling--even if the

only listener is the implied reader. Both kinds of stories are informed by a moral dimension: one that can reward the person who actively seeks or asks others--and their help, as well.

Likewise, Carver's female characters may be stuck in relationships with men who are disconnected from a future tense in their thinking, who waste their lives drinking and watching television. Even so, Carver testifies to the small victories of some of these women. When Marge goes to clean up after the Holitses, for example, she finds the unit already clean:

> The counters have been wiped down, the sink and cupboards are clean. It's not so bad. I leave the cleaning things on the stove and go take a look at the bathroom. Nothing there a little steel wool won't take care of. Then I open the door to the bedroom that looks out over the pool. The blinds are raised, the bed is stripped. The floor shines. "Thanks," I say out loud. Wherever she's going, I wish her luck. "Good luck, Betty." (Cathedral 208)

Nonverbally, Betty has communicated to Marge her own optimism, or perhaps, just determination for a better life. Michael Gearhart notes how some characters communicate to one another by their actions (440-41). Stories such as "Whoever Was Using This Bed" and "A Small, Good Thing" underscore the power and comfort of shared nonverbal communication, enabling couples to "move forward" together.

In "A Small, Good Thing," Ann constantly seems to be looking

for signs of reassurance, and engages not only doctors and other staff at the hospital, but the family of another patient, as well as her husband. Gearhart observes that characters in this story, and especially Ann, "become increasingly self-conscious in regard to body language, [and] their ability to use it as a substitute for verbal shortcomings increases accordingly" (441). Laurie Stone comments that "Carver conveys how the parents feel through their actions" (55), allowing readers to understand them (or "read them") this way, as well. Not only do some characters communicate effectively with each other nonverbally, readers of Carver's stories are seemingly able to read their feelings by how they behave; they act in ways that make them seem, in Carver's words, "recognizably human."

Alan Davis insists that despite the impositions upon Carver's characters and those they impose on themselves, they do "attempt 'to get it talked out,' to connect authentically in a damaged world" (655). Talking and listening help characters in "Where I'm Calling From" to make it on their own, in the world outside. A recovering alcoholic for his last decade and more, Carver writes with authority about the encouragement of others--even a kiss can help characters gain a strong sense of self. Peter Donahue notes how, in particular, through the language of storytelling, characters psychologically work through their impairing sensibilities. Among recovering alcoholics, such stories are not criticized but are respectfully listened to. This may be because narratives imply a future tense and room for

personal psychological development. "In both AA and Carver's 'Where I'm Calling From,' the recovering alcoholic does not try to reason out his disease or make judgments on himself or others when he narrates his story" (56). In fact, according to Donohue,

> [an] alcoholic who is recovering is always in a process of potentiality with respect to his or her use of language, with each word possessing an inherent ambiguity, a non-ideological openness or using Umberto Eco's phrasing, "a poetic function" [A Theory of Sign Production 262]. (58)

Warren Carlin describes how the characters benefit by their communions and conversations. What is beneficial, according to Carlin, is their being together and listening to one another; what they say is less important: for their social communion is itself really an act of love and represents their searching for some understanding, also: "Their talk about love produces unity among the participants" (92). "A Small, Good Thing," "Cathedral," and "Fever" seem to offer Christian motifs and symbols. One part of these involves the drawing together of people who share common, recognizable goals and aspirations. In "Cathedral" two unlike characters--but both related to an obviously kind and caring woman--are drawn together, and by communication and communion together draw an embodiment of spiritual unity: a cathedral with imaginary people in it. In "Fever" the saintly Mrs. Webster draws out Carlyle's fever, and draws out his story from him: her listening and approving and

soothing comments minister to his troubled spirit. His story--for him, subconsciously, doubtless a kind of confession--allows him to begin to "let her [his wife] go" (Where 331). Mrs. Webster's encouraging ministry here is one highly valued throughout Carver's stories: to listen to others sympathetically. Mrs. Webster's listening to him is the very thing Carlyle needs the most, and she helps him to recover physically and spiritually: she encourages him to "go on" with his story because she wants to hear it and because he will feel better afterwards (330). When he concludes, Mrs. Webster says to him, "Good. Good for you. . . . You're made out of good stuff. And so is she--so is Mrs. Carlyle. And don't you forget it. You're both going to be okay after this is over" (330-31). Not only do Carlyle's anxieties leave him, in the last sentence of "Fever," Carlyle is able to focus with confidence upon his children.

In "A Small, Good Thing" commentators such as Kathleen Westfall Shute, William L. Stull ("Beyond Hopelessville"), and others have described how explicit the Christian tropes and symbols are in this story. Shute perceptively describes the journey of the Weisses as a "contemporary via dolorosa by which the characters may trudge toward salvation" (123). Even Scotty's death is seen as a redeeming force that allows the baker and the Weisses to come together in a deeply felt way. Stull comments how deep Ann Weiss's need is for community in this story, and how her praying together with her husband helps her gain a measure of strength and unity, and allows her to receive the baker's own

story. Confrontation gives way to communication, confession, forgiveness, and communion in the final scene of "A Small, Good Thing." No longer alone, Ann receives comfort inside the warming and gradually brightening bakery and "did not think of leaving" (Where 405).

Thomas Haslam contends that Carver understands people "as intrinsic story-tellers, as dialogic selves who find their meaning, value, and identity through and by interaction with other selves, other stories" (57). Their efforts to tell stories and to work through conversations with others, to attend to and to listen to others carefully and respectfully, seems to mimic how people actually obtain psychological closure in our real world. Also, Carver's focus upon his characters' imaginations make his stories fascinating for readers, who first connect emotionally with his characters, and then work to connect up intellectually with them--that is, readers are engaged not only with the stories as a whole, but imaginatively with the "people" in them.

Such connecting up is viewed by readers of Raymond Carver as both a process of communication and a measure by which readers can understand the nature of the changes characters experience within themselves in moments of growth. As Nelson Hathcock observes, Carver's narrators even have the potential power to reconstruct their lives through the language "and, in the process, arrive at some understanding or intuitive accord" (31). Carver's readers, by reading their "reconstructed" language, can

also better understand the means by which such narrators obtain a measure of psychological closure: both by their storytelling and by their reaching out to others (including the implied reader). Lastly, readers of Carver's stories understand that, along with desire, what is needed to facilitate a stronger, more purposeful self is a willingness to listen to others carefully and, thereby, to respect them. Unlike the photo image and camera, which tend to pass judgment by their literalness, the listening ears of characters are sympathetic.

Because Carver has so fully overheard and carefully listened to his characters' imaginary and imaginative voices (in addition to portraying their "worlds" using a variety of iconic imagery), readers can do the same. Listening is a selective process of perception, neither wide-open nor closed, but semiopen. Raymond Carver's stories engage readers by these fictive voices and visions, which represent, ultimately, people in our world.

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