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A Cry of Bleakness:
The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Short Fiction

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

January 1988

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ISBN 0-315-44855-5

ABSTRACT

A Cry of Bleakness: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Short Fiction

David Sherman

Raymond Carver's stories depict the landscape of middle America. His characters are waitresses, blue-collar workers, teachers, apartment managers, the unemployed, alcoholics, and couples at various stages of discord or apathy. They exist amid the flotsam and jetsam of American consumer society, live in pre-fab apartment buildings, and watch daytime television. For the most part, they are passive as life's events swirl around them, seemingly beyond their control.

In this thesis, I trace Carver's development from his early works to Cathedral, his most recent collection of short stories. I discuss the evolution of Carver's technique and subject matter within the context of the current American short story, and analyze the paradigmatic elements of a typical Carver story in a review of his three collections of fiction.

Contrary to what has emerged as a rather loose critical consensus, I do not view Carver's writing as "dirty realism"--which purports to contain characters who act and speak as they would in real life. I consider instead the stories as highly mannered fables, in which the

most basic human dilemmas are couched in ordinary situations. They simultaneously address real life while appearing larger than life. The emotions conveyed are real, not necessarily the characters.

Carver's fiction taps into a universal mythology and transforms ordinary detail into momentous realities. It is this "transformation" process which enables the stories to achieve their stark power.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Robert Allen for his invaluable advice and expertise in the field of the contemporary short story.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, the inarticulate townspeople of Winesburg confide in the young reporter George Willard. They tell him their secret fears, dreams, and aspirations. They believe that Willard, through his gift of words, will be able to speak for them. He will write the book they cannot write. Raymond Carver, like a contemporary Sherwood Anderson, is a voice for a new generation of forgotten Americans.

Carver depicts the landscape of lower-class middle America. His characters are waitresses, blue-collar workers, teachers, apartment managers, the unemployed, alcoholics, and couples at various stages of discord or apathy. They exist amid the flotsam and jetsam of American consumer society, live in pre-fab apartment buildings, and watch daytime television.

At 48, Raymond Carver has had two lives. Born in Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1939, Carver grew up in the logging town of Yakima, Washington, where his father worked at the sawmill and his mother waited on tables and held odd jobs.

By the time he was 20 Carver was married and the father of two children, a fact which would prove arduous as the Carvers struggled through a series of low-paying jobs and moves through California towns like Arcata, Eureka, Paradise, Sacramento, and Santa Cruz. The years of hardship culminated with Carver's descent into alcoholism and the break-up of his marriage.

Throughout the difficult times, Carver continued to write and drink, publishing stories mainly in small literary magazines while working variously as a hospital janitor, tulip picker, apartment manager, gas jockey, and textbook editor. The drinking was serious, as Carver recalls in a 1983 interview:

It's very painful to think about some of the things that happened back then. I made a wasteland out of everything I touched. But I might add that towards the end of the drinking there wasn't much left anyway. But specific things? Let's just say, on occasion, the police were involved and emergency rooms and courtrooms.¹

Finally, in 1977, Carver reached, as he puts it, "the line of demarcation": "It finally sank in on me after that that I was not going to be able to drink like a normal person. I guess I wanted to live."² It turned out to be his final drying-out period.

In 1981, Carver published What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, considered by the British critic Frank Kermode to be "the work of a full-grown master,"³ followed by Cathedral, in 1983. In his review of the latter, Irving

Howe comments: "A few of Carver's stories . . . can already be counted among the masterpieces of American fiction."⁴

Currently married to the poet Tess Gallagher and recipient of the five-year, \$35,000-per-annum Mildred and Harold Strauss award granted by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Raymond Carver has finally achieved the security and fulfillment conspicuously absent in the lives he writes about.

Much of the fiction I will examine in this study deals with life as it was during Carver's difficult times, the times--as he states in the essay "Fires"--"when the dreams go bust." Here, Carver discusses his influences: "I'm talking about real influence now. I'm talking about the moon and the tide . . .":

For years my wife and I had held to a belief that if we worked hard and tried to do the right things, the right things would happen. It's not such a bad thing to try and build a life on. Hard work, goals, good intentions, loyalty, we believed these were virtues and would someday be rewarded. We dreamt when we had the time for it. But, eventually, we realized that hard work and dreams were not enough. Somewhere, in Iowa City maybe, or shortly afterwards, in Sacramento, the dreams began to go bust.

The time came and went when everything my wife and I held sacred, or considered worthy of respect, every spiritual value, crumbled away. Something terrible had happened to us. It was something that we had never seen occur in any other family. We couldn't fully comprehend what had happened. It was erosion, and we couldn't stop it.⁵

Carver is also talking about the failure of the "American Dream," a subject that is at the heart of a long

tradition of American literature. In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald depicts an America that has strayed from its roots. Traditional values of self-improvement and individual striving have given way to empty materialism and moral corruption. In Miller's Death of a Salesman, Willy Loman fails to recognize the purity of his son's love and commits suicide in a pathetically misguided attempt at heroism. In The Day of the Locust, West depicts people who have come to California in search of ease and fortune, only to be consumed by their own boredom. Eventually, their search for titillation degenerates into blind lust and the pursuit of violence as an end in itself.

However, a new tradition, or at least a reinvigorated version of the old one, has appeared in the last decade. Carver and writers like Richard Ford, Frederick Barthelme, Jayne Anne Phillips, Elizabeth Tallent, Tobias Wolff, and Bobbie Ann Mason--and younger, lesser-known writers like Joy Williams and Judy Troy--examine the minutiae of ordinary life in a distinctly contemporary setting of American bleakness: "low-rent tragedies," as one character in a Carver story puts it. From their perspective, the dream is long dead. The new fiction depicts the aftermath, rather than the process, of its demise.

Due to his output and critical reputation, Raymond Carver is generally acknowledged to be the dominant writer

of the genre. Tom Jenks, the fiction editor for Esquire, observes:

The style most often attempted by young writers is one marked by short, hard-edged sentences, like those of Ray Carver, and the subject matter often brushes up against Carver's as well--representative of what I would call a downside neo-realism.⁶

In his introduction to an issue of Granta featuring examples of work by Carver, Ford, Phillips, Tallent, Mason, and Wolff, Bill Buford groups this new writing into a school of sorts, which he terms "dirty realism": "It is a fiction . . . devoted to the local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture. . . . this is a curious, dirty realism about the belly-side of contemporary life."⁷

James Atlas makes a similar argument in his review of Carver's What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. In addition, he sees the work of Carver, Ford, and others as a reaction against the American intellectual establishment and the "great tradition" in American letters:

Not everyone has to write the great American novel. But I suspect there is a more impersonal element in the evolution of this now-recognizable style: the anti-authoritarian temper of the sixties. Cries for "relevance" in literature are no longer heard, but there remains a suspicion of literary hierarchies, a longing to be free of what F.R. Leavis called "the great tradition." How many American writers still set out to measure themselves against that tradition--or against any tradition? The barren idiom of our time is an idiom of refusal, a repudiation of the idea of greatness. The literary finery of Updike and Styron, the new prose declares, is archaic;

it belongs to a vanished era, like the bowler and the morning coat.⁸

It is important to bear in mind that the critical climate surrounding the work is still very much in flux. In my view, Raymond Carver's stories are less "dirty realism"--which purports to contain characters who act and speak as they would in real life--than they are highly mannered fables in which basic human dilemmas are couched in ordinary situations. The emotions conveyed are real, not necessarily the characters themselves. In many cases they are abstractions rather than flesh-and-blood human beings.

While political and social criticism exist by implication in many of these stories, there is none of the outrage found in the politically and socially conscious fiction of previous decades, such as Ellison's Invisible Man and Baldwin's The Fire Next Time. For the hard-luck drifter/car thief of Ford's "Rock Springs" (facing an uncertain future alone with a young daughter), or the unemployed man who has taken to spending his days lying on the couch in Carver's "Preservation," the idealistic crusades of the sixties have been played out. What remains is a transient and rootless existence in a new kind of American wasteland. Consider the closing paragraph of "Rock Springs":

And I wondered, because it seemed funny, what would you think a man was doing if you saw him in the middle of the night looking in the

windows of cars in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn? Would you think he was trying to get his head cleared? Would you think he was trying to get ready for a day when trouble would come down on him? Would you think his girlfriend was leaving him? Would you think he had a daughter? Would you think he was anybody like you?"

In this study I intend to trace Carver's development from his early stories to Cathedral, his most recent and most widely acclaimed collection. I will discuss the evolution of Carver's technique and subject matter within the context of the new American short story, and will attempt to demonstrate how Carver's fiction transcends "dirty realism." Examples will be selected from Carver's three collections of fiction: Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976), What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (1981), and Cathedral (1983).

In order to more clearly trace Carver's evolution, I have itemized what I consider to be the paradigmatic elements of the typical Carver story. The stories will be analyzed in light of the following "Carver paradigm."

The Carver Paradigm

Spare Prose Style

In The Shape of Content, the artist Ben Shahn defines "form" as:

... not just the intention of content; it is the embodiment of content. Form is based, first, upon a supposition, a theme. Form is, second, a marshaling of materials, the inert matter in which the theme is to be the case. Form is, third, a setting of boundaries of

limits, the whole extent of an idea, but no more, an outer shape to the outer limits, the initial establishing of harmonies. Form is, further, the abolishing of excessive content, of content that falls outside true limits of the theme. It is the abolishing of excessive materials, whatever material is extraneous to inner harmony, to the order of shapes now established. Form is thus a discipline, an ordering, according to the needs of content.¹⁰

Carver's lean and exact prose, the most obvious feature of his technique, exemplifies Shahn's view of the role of "form": the abolishing of excessive content and excessive materials extraneous to the inner harmony of the work.

The Contemporary Fable

It is my contention that Carver's stories are updated versions of an old form, the fable. Physical description, characterization, and plot are carefully shorn of extraneous detail. The pared-down prose propels the story with consummate speed toward its essential message or "moral"--the depiction of elemental truths about human nature.

Elisions

The elisions, or what is left unsaid, in a Carver story are of great importance. In Carver's own words:

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 is also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things.¹¹

Transformation Process

In the paradigmatic Carver story, small situations and events are transformed into large and important realities. Carver takes individual human relationships and creates certain basic, archetypal situations around which each story revolves. These situations are mythic in the Jungian sense of evoking unconscious responses which have universal meaning. It is, as Sam Sheppard observes of his own work, a mythology that comes "out of the guts of man":

The interesting thing about taking real blood relationships is that the more you start to investigate those things as external characters, the more you see they're also internal characters. The mythology wasn't some trick someone invented to move us. It came out of the guts of man. And myths are related on an emotional level. They're not strictly intellectual programs.¹²

Negative Epiphany

"Epiphany has become the standard term for the description, frequent in modern poetry and fiction, of the sudden flare into revelation of an ordinary object or scene."¹³ The traditional epiphany (e.g., Gabriel's insight into the inadequacy of his life and his confrontation with mortality in Joyce's "The Dead") does not exist in the paradigmatic Carver story. The information is communicated over the heads of the characters directly to the readers. The characters are unable to understand their predicaments or to articulate their shadowy knowledge. Hence, it is the reader's task to

appropriate what are traditionally the character's revelations. I will refer to this phenomenon as the "negative epiphany." These moments are transitional in that they invariably occur at the point where irrevocable, if not precisely definable, changes occur in the characters' lives.

Symbolism and Imagery

A symbol or image in a Carver story will sketch a character's whole universe within the blink of an eye, and then slowly fade as the immediate action proceeds. Upon completing the story, the symbol or image continues to reverberate in the reader's mind and becomes the story's signature. For example, the most memorable aspect of "Feathers" in Cathedral is a series of bizarre visual images--a plaster cast of deformed teeth, an incredibly ugly baby, and a multi-coloured peacock's tail. They also function as symbols--of the pathetic aspects of the characters' existence.

Heightened Reality

Carver's stories are anchored in everyday life, yet the apparent normalcy of things can give way to a surreal atmosphere or a heightened reality characterized by fear, bewilderment, and, on several occasions, visions of encroaching madness. These moments are reminiscent of the world of Kafka's fiction, in which the familiar suddenly appears strange and threatening.

CHAPTER TWO

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, Carver's first collection of short stories, was published in 1976 by McGraw-Hill. It contains revised versions of stories which originally appeared in the following publications: Esquire, Northwest, December, Chicago Review, Iowa Review, Discourse, Seneca Review, Carolina Quarterly, Fiction, Harper's Bazaar, Western Humanities Review, Perspective, and Sou'Wester.

"Neighbors," Carver's first story to appear in a major magazine (Esquire), describes what happens when the Millers, a young couple, are entrusted with the care of their neighbours' apartment. While their neighbours, the Stones, are away on one of their trips, the Millers' drab lives take on a new dimension. In the course of watering the plants and feeding the cat, they begin to partake surreptitiously of bits of the Stones' lives. As the Millers become immersed in the world of the apartment, the

mood of the story shifts from benign, ordinary reality to charged fantasy.

When Bill Miller enters the apartment for the first time, we are aware that he is about to enter another world. Even the air seems different:

Bill took a deep breath as he entered the Stones' apartment. The air was already heavy and it was vaguely sweet . . .¹⁴

Carver taps into our voyeuristic desires and creates a seductive fantasy. Like the Millers, and almost against our better judgment, we too become immersed in the titillating possibilities of the apartment world:

Inside it seemed cooler than his apartment, and darker too. He wondered if the plants had something to do with the temperature of the air. he looked out the window, and then he moved slowly through each room considering everything that fell under his gaze, carefully, one object at a time. He saw ashtrays, items of furniture, kitchen utensils, the clock. He saw everything. At last he entered the bedroom, and the cat appeared at his feet. He stroked her once, carried her into the bathroom, and shut the door.¹⁵

For her part, Arlene Miller finds the apartment equally stimulating. She goes over to "feed Kitty" and returns with "lint clinging to the back of her sweater" and "the color high in her cheeks." She later reveals that she "found some pictures" in the Stones' bedroom.¹⁶

Despite their increased sexual appetites--Bill even leaves work early to come home and make love to his wife--the Millers find little to actually talk about. The apartment fantasy becomes the central concern of their

lives. They even begin to lose touch with their own identities. When Bill Miller looks into the Stones' bathroom mirror and peers out the living-room window, it is as if he is trying to place himself, to affirm just who he really is:

He lay for a while with his eyes closed, and then he moved his hand under his belt. He tried to recall what day it was. He tried to remember when the Stones were due back, and then he wondered if they would ever return. He could not remember their faces or the way they talked and dressed. He sighed and with effort rolled off the bed to lean over the dresser and look at himself in the mirror.¹⁷

The mirror and window--traditional symbols of clarity of vision and insight--have been inverted. Bill Miller does not "see" himself clearly. He is unable to understand his predicament. For the Millers, the Stones have ceased to exist. They have become a vague, shadowy presence represented through their objects, which Bill and Arlene Miller voyeuristically appropriate to fill the vacancy they sense in their own lives.

Like Bill, Arlene Miller also begins to wonder if the Stones will ever return. She is "at once astonished at her words." She imagines the Stones walking in on them while they are in the apartment and stops herself in mid-sentence--Carver hinting at her groping awareness. However, Carver does not allow the Millers to gain any concrete insights into their predicament. They never fully understand what has happened to them and the kind of world they have been drawn into. In the final paragraph, the

moment crystallizes into an instant of pure terror. We are left suspended, on the verge of a momentous release which Carver will not allow his characters to experience. The possibility of being locked out of the apartment assumes a disproportionate significance in the Millers' minds. It becomes something that is too terrible to contemplate.

He tried the knob. It was locked.
Then she tried the knob. It would not turn.
her lips were parted, and her breathing was
hard, expectant. He opened his arms and she
moved into them.

"Don't worry," he said into her ear.
"For God's sake, don't worry."

They stayed there. They held each
other. They leaned into the door as if
against a wind, and braced themselves.¹⁸

We can appropriate the Millers' negative epiphany and confront what they cannot. We can appreciate the motivating factors behind their obsession with the apartment: the boredom and emptiness of their lives and their inability to achieve any true human closeness. The Millers are incapable of delving below the surface to confront the deeper causes of their boredom. Their inability to communicate with one another is inextricably linked with their inability to achieve any kind of introspection. Neither of them is aware of the significance behind their actions. Their final embrace is a union of ignorance and fear rather than a positive affirmation of closeness and strength.

"Neighbors" maintains a carefully orchestrated balance between ordinariness and a heightened sense of

reality. The story is less an exercise in "dirty realism" than it is a kind of fable depicting the bizarre, almost mad, world that lurks below the surface of apparent normalcy. At the close of the story we know that something is very wrong. Yet we do not know quite what it is. The impact is largely visceral; Carver does not explain or intrude. He has succeeded in creating a world where the most basic of human emotions are conveyed, often entirely without words.

"The Idea," another story in which voyeurism figures prominently, describes a middle-aged couple's routine of spying on their neighbours. The man next door is in the habit of peeking through the window at his own wife while she is undressing. The couple (the woman narrates the story) observe the enactment of their neighbour's ritualized sexual fantasy as if it were television:

I could make out someone behind the curtain now. It must have been her undressing. But I couldn't see any detail. I strained my eyes. Vern was wearing his reading glasses, so he could see everything better than I could. Suddenly the curtain was drawn aside and the woman turned her back to the window.

"What's she doing now?" I said, knowing full well.

"By God," Vern said.

"What's she doing, Vern?" I said.

"She's taking off her clothes," Vern said. "What do you think she's doing?"¹⁹

Like the couple in "Neighbors," these people's lives are so thoroughly boring that voyeurism provides the stimulation they seek, distracting them from the deficiencies

in their own lives. Their night's entertainment is an empty pursuit, based on passivity and instant gratification--traits commonly associated with watching television. Significantly, TV is America's medium. It is a signpost of contemporary American culture and a familiar motif in the current American short story.

Allusions to TV, coupled with innumerable references to brand names, have become so commonplace in stories by Carver and his peers as to take on a pejorative connotation. Open Frederick Barthelme's Moong Deluxe, and in the space of a page one will find references to "Artscanada," Lowenbrau, "Pier 1 glasses," and "David Hockney prints."²⁰ Perhaps it is such obvious examples of excess (a flawed story in an otherwise strong collection) which has helped foster some of the critical reaction against Carver and other American writers of his generation.²¹

In Carver's fiction, however, the TV is a natural fixture in his characters' lives. For example, the narrator of "The Idea" refers to the TV in the bedroom:

Vern was asleep. The little TV at the foot of the bed was on, but the picture was rolling.
 . . . I watched for a while, but it was a talk show and I don't like talk shows . . .²²

For purposes of comparison, consider how TV is used in another recent short story, Bobbie Ann Mason's "Graveyard Day." In this story, the central character is faced with the difficulty of adapting to change. She is divorced and has a ten-year-old daughter. She views any

prospective man as something like a "substitute host on a talk show":

She hates the thought of a string of husbands, and the idea of a stepfather is like a substitute host on a talk show. It makes her think of Johnny Carson's many substitute hosts.²³

Both authors attempt to place their characters within a recognizable population: Americans with little education, whose culture is garnered largely from television. However, I do not believe that such a character would actually speak of TV in a metaphorical sense. It sounds like the author talking rather than her creation. In contrast, Carver's matter-of-fact TV reference places his character within a clearly defined social context without calling unnecessary attention to itself.

Carver depicts a world of specificity which becomes larger than life. The TV, like the K Mart, the frozen dinner, or country music, is a type of American icon which evokes unconscious responses that have universal meaning, thereby entering the realm of myths. (See introduction for discussion of Jungian mythology.) Relevant examples in the visual arts are Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup tins and Edward Hopper's eerily hyper-real interiors, which evoke a sense of déjà vu comparable to Carver's "Neighbors."

As "The Idea" develops, the narrator reveals that the night's activity makes her and Vern "jumpy."²⁴ As in "Neighbors," the couple's voyeurism awakens sexual

feelings, which in this case are sublimated by eating. They both find that they have tremendous "appetites," which they satisfy by gorging themselves.

After their snack, the narrator discovers an infestation of ants in the kitchen. Her negative epiphany takes place after she has sprayed the kitchen and gone to bed:

Pretty soon I imagined them [the ants] 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.

I kept spraying.

Finally I raised the shade in the kitchen and looked out. It was late. The wind blew and I heard branches snap.

"That trash," I said: "The idea."

I used even worse language, things I can't repeat.²⁵

With one sentence, "I turned on every light in the house until I had the house blazing," Carver succeeds in instantly altering the mood of the story. The narrator is in such a heightened emotional state that she is also "blazing." While unable to articulate what her vision signifies, she is at least able to feel something. Vern, in contrast, verges on catatonia. Perhaps at the unconscious level, the narrator is confronting the guilt of experiencing sexual feelings (her enormous appetite), which she correspondingly associates with creatures like the ants (insects and vermin are traditional literary symbols of repressed sexuality). Ultimately, I believe that Carver's

main intent is to provide a precise record of the moment. Something has happened to this woman that is at once terrifying and mysterious. She cannot articulate what it is, save for expressing her uneasiness at the woman who precipitated her crisis--the "trash."

A third story, "They're Not Your Husband," chronicles a man's obsession with his wife's weight, exposing his own warped sense of inadequacy and the hopeless state of their relationship. From the opening lines of the story, the characters' signatures are clear. Earl Ober is unemployed and a drinker. His wife, Doreen, works as a waitress in a coffee shop. One night, after he has been drinking, Earl drops by to try to get a free meal and overhears two men commenting about his wife's weight. The sight of Doreen's flesh repels him as he watches the men look at her:

She came back with the pot and poured coffee for him and for the two men. Then she picked up a dish and turned to get some ice cream. She reached down into the container and with the dipper began to scoop up the ice cream. The white skirt yanked against her hips and crawled up her legs. What showed was girdle, and it was pink, thighs that were rumpled and gray and a little hairy, and veins that spread out in a berserk display.²⁶

The next day, Earl suggests that Doreen go on a diet. This will be no ordinary diet. Beneath Earl and Doreen's offhand discussion about diets lurks the self-destructive impulses that characterize their behaviour and their marriage:

They talked about diets. They talked about the protein diets, the vegetable-only diets, the grapefruit-juice diets. But they decided they didn't have the money to buy the steaks the protein diet called for. And Doreen said she didn't care for all that many vegetables. And since she didn't like grapefruit juice that much, she didn't see how she could do that one, either.

"Okay, forget it," he said.

"No, you're right," she said. "I'll do something."

"What about exercises?" he said.

"I'm getting all the exercise I need down there," she said.

"Just quit eating," Earl said. "For a few days, anyway."

"All right," she said. "I'll try. For a few days I'll give it a try. You've convinced me."

"I'm a closer," Earl said.²⁷

The final line of the passage, "I'm a closer," is ominous. From this point on, the world of the story succumbs to a quiet madness. Carver presents a picture of the American work ethic gone berserk. Earl chronicles Doreen's weight loss with accountant-like meticulousness, yet he is literally starving her. He is unemployed, yet he channels all his energy into his destructive obsession:

Each morning he followed her into the bathroom and waited while she stepped onto the scale. He got down on his knees with a pencil and the piece of paper. The paper was covered with dates, days of the week, numbers. He read the number on the scale, consulted the paper, and either nodded his head or pursed his lips.²⁸

Carver's deliberately understated prose reinforces his characters' detachment. They are detached from their own emotions and from each other. Earl and Doreen proceed as if they are suffering from an emotional numbness.

Unthinkably cruel and self-destructive behaviour becomes commonplace:

"People are saying things at work," she said.

"What kind of things?" Earl said.

"That I'm too pale, for one thing," she said. "That I don't look like myself. They're afraid I'm losing too much weight."

"What is wrong with losing?" he said.

"Don't you pay any attention to them. Tell them to mind their own business. They're not your husband. You don't have to live with them."²⁹

"They're Not Your Husband" is a story where sadness is cumulative; Doreen's passivity is crushing; the traditional concept of family life has been inverted: Doreen must work at night and sleep during the day; the children are mentioned, but it is as if they are not there at all. Finally, Earl's situation is hopeless--he goes through the motions of looking for a job, but our tacit understanding is that he will not find one.

Eventually, Earl returns to the coffee shop and, in a painful recreation of the opening sequence, tries to goad two other men into commenting about Doreen's now anorexic condition. Earl is by turns loathsome and pathetic. He is akin to one of Sherwood Anderson's "grotesques"--his face literally pulled out of shape as he indulges in a perverse self-humiliation. Our view of the scene is so acute that we are almost embarrassed to be a party to it:

The other waitress came straight to Doreen.

"Who is this character?" she said.

"Who?" Doreen said and looked around with the ice-cream dish in her hand.

"Him," the other waitress said and nodded at Earl. "Who is this joker, anyway?"

Earl put on his best smile. He held it. He held it until he felt his face pulling out of shape.

But the other waitress just studied him, and Doreen began to shake her head slowly. The man had put some change beside his cup and stood up, but he too waited to hear the answer. They all stared at Earl.

"He's a salesman. He's my husband," Doreen said at last, shrugging. Then she put the unfinished chocolate sundae in front of him and went to total up his check.³⁰

Doreen does seem to be conscious of her largely self-inflicted martyrdom. She pauses and shakes her head slowly--in resignation, perhaps?--before responding to the other waitresses' question about Earl. Whatever knowledge she may possess, however, does not have a positive effect on her situation. There is simply no way out. Carver depicts a new, "post-American Dream" wasteland. Traditional American values like the family, hard work, and faith in the future have either assumed bizarre, perverted forms or have simply faded away.

"The Ducks," the last story in the collection I will examine in detail, opens with a description of an impending rainstorm. The rain will characterize the mood of the story, by turns suggesting an unseen menace and conveying a sense of unrelenting boredom. Small details of the opening paragraph, "the sheets popping shot-like in the wind," and the central character urgently splitting wood contribute to its portentous tone:

A wind came up that afternoon, bringing gusts of rain and sending the ducks up off the lake in black explosions looking for the quiet potholes out in the timber. . . . He worked

faster, driving the iron wedge down harder into the big dry chunks, splitting them so far down that the rotten ones flew apart. On his wife's clothesline, strung up between the two sugar pines, sheets and blankets popped shotlike in the wind. He made two trips and carried all the wood onto the porch before it started to rain.³¹

The central character leaves for the night shift at the sawmill, but soon returns home unexpectedly to his wife:

She was sitting in a chair by the living-room window listening to the radio and the rain when she saw the pickup lights turn into the drive. She got up quickly and hurried to the back door. He stood there in the doorway, and she touched his wet, rubbery coat with her fingers.

"They told everybody to go home. The mill boss had a heart attack. He fell right down on the floor up in the mill and died."³²

Carver uses gesture to reveal the emotions his characters are unable to articulate--a technique he will refine and develop in his later fiction, most notably in "Why Don't You Dance" and "Cathedral." In "The Ducks," minute gestures, such as the sensuous and evocative image of the man's wife touching her husband's raincoat, and in the following paragraph her little pose in the tub and her attempt at a smile, are enough to reveal her fear and the gulf of non-communication that exists between them:

She stood up in the tub and began drying herself. When she noticed him watching, she smiled and draped the towel over her shoulder and made a little step in the tub and posed.

"How does it look?"

"All right," he said.

"Okay," she said.

"I thought you were still . . . you know," he said.

"I am." She finished drying and dropped the towel on the floor beside the tub

and stepped daintily onto it. The mirror beside her was steamy, and the odor of her body carried to him. She turned around and reached up to a shelf for the box. Then she slipped into her belt and adjusted the white pad. She tried to look at him, she tried to smile.³³

Her husband is disturbed by what has happened at work but is unsure just how to react and proceeds to spend the evening smoking, watching TV, and flipping through magazines. He casts about in his mind for some kind of spark or hint of change, as it is apparent that boredom is the central problem in his life. He yearns for the kind of freedom and flight symbolized by the ducks in the opening paragraph:

He reached over her, kissed her on the shoulder, and switched off the light. "You know," he said, lying back down, "I think I want to get out of here. Go someplace else." She moved over to him and put her leg between his. They lay on their sides facing each other, lips almost touching. He wondered if his breath smelled as clean as hers. He said, "I just want to go back home and see my folks. Or maybe go on up to Oregon. That's good country."

"If that's what you want," she said.

"I think so," he said. "There's a lot of places to go."³⁴

After a half-hearted attempt at making love, his mind begins to wander:

She moved a little and took his hand and put it on her breast. Then she opened her mouth and kissed him, pulling his head down with her other hand. Slowly she inched up in the bed, gently moving his head down to her breast. He took the nipple and began working it in his mouth. He tried to think how much he loved her or if he loved her. He could hear her breathing but he could also hear the rain. They lay like this.³⁵

In other circumstances the rain might be considered romantic. Here it conveys a sense of sadness and irretrievable loss. The protagonist is unable to come to terms with his tangled emotions. He cannot confront his feelings about his marriage, his boredom, or the shock of what happened that night at work. Yet these unacknowledged emotions keep preying on him. They hammer at him like the relentless and increasingly threatening drone of the rain that he now hears "all over the house."

As in "Neighbors," the associations of a window with clarity of vision have been altered. The man cannot "see" or understand what it is that is troubling him. Suddenly, he is afraid. He confronts something that is terrifying in its mystery:

He got out of bed and went to the window. It was black outside and he could see nothing, not even the rain. But he could hear it, cascading off the roof and into a puddle under the window. He could hear it all over the house. He ran his finger across the drool on the glass.

When he got back into bed, he moved close to her and put his hand on her hip. "Hon, wake up," he whispered. But she only shuddered and moved over farther to her own side. She kept on sleeping. "Wake up," he whispered. "I hear something outside."³⁶

However, Carver has subverted the traditional moment of epiphany. The protagonist is unable to comprehend the nature of his problems or to take constructive steps to solve them. He can only experience the terror of being completely alone. We can infer that his wife shares

similar fears. Yet, ironically, they cannot share them with each other. They are destined to move in their own separate worlds.

To sum up, the stories in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? highlight many of the techniques which Carver will refine and develop in his later work: a lean, spare prose style, the negative epiphany, the use of elisions and gesture, and the creation of a bizarre, heightened reality. The bleak surface of "Neighbors," "The Idea," and "They're Not Your Husband" show Carver's vision of a "post-American-dream" wasteland beginning to take shape. With their worlds slightly off-kilter and shadowy terrors lurking beneath ordinary situations, the stories examined are less "dirty realism" than modern Kafkaesque fables. They transform small situations and events into large and important realities, a technique that Carver will employ in his later works.

For my analysis, I have included examples of what I consider paradigmatic Carver stories. Since Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? contains stories culled from various magazines published over a period of approximately ten years, the stories in this volume are quite varied, some very different from what will emerge in subsequent collections as Carver's typical pattern.

The title story is a lengthy account of a man's fall and redemption when confronted with his wife's infidelity. It is more conventional in plot and structure, more "literary," than Carver's later stories. In addition, the central character experiences a fully realized, traditional epiphany.

Another story, "Nobody Said Anything," is very much in the tradition of twentieth-century American realism. It is both a fishing story in the mold of Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" and an acutely drawn portrait of adolescent sexuality--a story James Atlas could well be referring to when, in his review of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, he describes Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? as "display[ing] a mastery of colloquial American idioms, reminiscent of Ring Lardner and Sherwood Anderson."³⁷

CHAPTER THREE

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love

In a recent essay, Jayne Ann Phillips notes that much current American short fiction is concerned with "how things fall apart and what is left when they do."³⁸ Stories in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, such as "Why Don't You Dance?," "Gazebo," "A Serious Talk," and "Everything Stuck to Him" provide ample evidence for her argument. As a character in the latter story says, voicing what proves to be the dominant chord in the collection, "Things change . . . I don't know how they do. But they do without your realizing it or wanting them to."³⁹ In Carver's America, permanence and stability are either illusions or relics of the past. People move, relationships break up, families and marriages dissolve.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love is, as the title suggests, about talking. The stories deal with various forms of communication or, more often than not, its absence. Carver's lean, relentlessly pared-down prose is appropriate for conveying the intuitive, often non-verbal communication between his inarticulate characters.

In the Paris Review interview, Carver lists "Why Don't You Dance?" as the first story he wrote after he "finally stopped drinking." In just under seven pages, Carver's carefully contrived reticence belies a wealth of implied information. When the reader enters the world of the story and conspires to fill in the blanks, the result is, as the critic Frank Kermonde observes, ". . . a fiction so spare in manner that it takes time before one realizes how completely a whole culture and a whole moral condition are represented by even the most seemingly slight sketch."⁴⁰

The odd landscape of "Why Don't You Dance?"--a man decides to lay the contents of his house, complete with extension cords, out on his front yard--is described in thoroughly matter-of-fact prose:

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.

His side, her side.

He considered this as he sipped the whiskey.⁴¹

The mood is similar to that of "Neighbors." The story oscillates between the bizarre and the intimately familiar. Carver draws us into the story with such ease that we almost cease to consider the scene unusual:

The chiffonier stood 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 chiffoier. A rattan chair with a decorator pillow stood at the foot of the bed. The buffed aluminum kitchen set took up a part of the driveway. A yellow muslin cloth, much too large, a gift, covered the table and hung down over the sides. A potted fern was on the table, along with a box of silverware and a record player, also gifts. A big console-model television set rested on a coffee table, and a few feet away from this stood a sofa and chair and a floor lamp.⁴²

As the story progresses it becomes clear that the man has suffered a terrible loss: his family has left him, and he is desperately lonely. The demise of the family is virtually ubiquitous in Carver's fiction and that of his peers, for example, Richard Ford's just-published collection Rock Springs (the title story alluded to in my introduction), and Judy Troy's story "Geometry," published in 1987 in The New Yorker. In the latter story, the narrator, a recently divorced, childless woman in her thirties, is asked by an old friend, who is romantically involved with her seventeen-year-old sister-in-law, if she thinks the girl loves him:

"What about Sophia?" Gus said. "Do you think she really loves me?"

"I think she'd die for you."

"I know that, Beverly," he said, "but I don't want anyone dying for me. What I want is for a lot of people to love me. I know that's impossible and I know it's selfish."

"That's called a family," I told him.⁴³

While a part of her yearns for a family herself--earlier she half-jokingly asks Gus if "he would like to have a baby

with her too"--the narrator's ironic tone of voice intimates that for her circle, the very concept of family is like some strange relic, relegated to a museum.

The central character in "Why Don't You Dance?" is unable to articulate his feelings verbally. Moreover, he has no one to talk to. Yet his emotions surface in the form of his ritualized construction on the front lawn. It becomes his summation of a life that exists no more. It is also a cry for help, but no one seems to notice.

Now and then a car slowed and people stared. But no one stopped. It occurred to him that he wouldn't either.⁴⁴

Suddenly, the third-person narrator shifts our attention from the man looking at his furniture to a young couple who chance upon the scene, thinking it to be a yard sale. Carver effects a seamless transition by having the girl speak immediately. The necessary qualifying information is provided in the next sentence.

"It must be a yard sale," the girl said to the boy.

This girl and this boy were furnishing a little apartment.

The young couple sit on the bed, trying it out:

He lay down on the bed and put the pillow under his head.

"How does it feel?" she said.

"It feels firm," he said.

She turned on her side and put her hand to his face.

"Kiss me," she said.

"Let's get up," he said.

"Kiss me," she said.

She closed her eyes. She held him.

He said, "I'll see if anybody's home."

But he just sat up and stayed where he was, making believe he was watching the television.⁴⁶

In the next paragraph, Carver returns to his initial subject: we see the man returning from the market with more liquor. He finds the girl on the bed and the boy on the porch. They have turned on the lights and are watching TV. They ask him the price of the furniture. He is in effect bequeathing the remnants of his past to these two young passersby:

"I was thinking fifty dollars for the bed," the man said.

"Would you take forty?" the girl asked.

"I'll take forty," the man said.

He took a glass out of the carton. He took the newspaper off the glass. He broke the seal on the whiskey.

"How about the TV?" the boy said.

"Twenty-five."

"Would you take fifteen?" the girl said.

"Fifteen's okay. I could take fifteen," the man said.⁴⁷

The man eventually offers the boy and the girl something to drink. He asks them if they would like to put on a record and dance. The boy and the girl dance with each other, and then the girl dances with the man in the glow of the electric lamplight:

Arms about each other, their bodies pressed together, the boy and the girl moved up and down the driveway. They were dancing. And when the record was over, they did it again, and when that one ended, the boy said, "I'm drunk."

The girl said, "You're not drunk."

"Well, I'm drunk," the boy said.

The man turned the record over and the boy said, "I am."

"Dance with me," the girl said to the boy and then to the man, and when the man

stood up, she came to him with her arms wide open. . . . He felt her breath on his neck.

"I hope you like your bed," he said.

The girl closed and then opened her eyes. She pushed her face in to the man's shoulder. She pulled the man closer.

"You must be desperate or something," she said.⁴⁸

The story represents, in my opinion, the apex of Carver's lean or, for want of a better term, "minimalist" technique. I use the term here not to imply any sense of "smallness of vision and execution";⁴⁹ rather, I refer to "minimalism" as it applies to Shahn's definition of form cited in my introduction: ". . . the abolishing of excessive content, of content that falls outside the true limits of the theme." This is spare prose of great density. In the above passage, the speech rhythms (Carver's use of the imperative sense) and taut compression of the sentences mirror the earlier description of the boy and the girl on the bed. The initial impact of the scene is largely visceral. Later, the cumulative effect of Carver's stark sentences and contractions reverberates in our minds. One word, "desperate," is enough to send a shiver of recognition through our bones.

Yet the girl cannot recapture the moment she shared. It is as if it had occurred on another plane of consciousness entirely:

Weeks later, she said: "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."

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.⁵⁰

Part of her senses that something happened, but she is "unable to talk it out." She is fundamentally out of touch with her own feelings and therefore cannot communicate them. It seems that fleeting moments of closeness are the most Carver's characters can hope for.

If "Why Don't You Dance?" depicts intuitive, non-verbal communication between essentially inarticulate people, "A Serious Talk" describes a situation in which communication fails completely. In the story, a man visits his estranged wife on Christmas day, creates a scene, and then returns the following day to "apologize."

Carver quickly establishes the tension. In the opening paragraph, he briefly alludes to a few curious aspects of the central character's initial visit, viewed from the perspective of the day after:

Vera's car was there, no others, and Burt gave thanks for that. He pulled into the drive and stopped beside the pie he'd dropped the night before. It was still there, the aluminum pan upside down, a halo of pumpkin filling on the pavement. It was the day after Christmas.⁵¹

As the story progresses, we are shown what happened on Christmas day. Small details reveal the state of Burt and Vera's relationship. They sat in the living room and

"solemnly opened the presents Burt had brought over."⁵² We learn that later that day, Vera's "friend" and his children will be coming over for dinner. In keeping with Carver's characteristic landscape, the family has long since dissolved.

In what will be a pivotal scene, Burt watches his daughter methodically set the table.

From time to time his daughter walked into the dining room with something for the table. Burt watched her. He watched her fold the linen napkins into the wine glasses. He watched her put a slender vase in the middle of the table. He watched her lower a flower into the vase, doing it ever so carefully.⁵³

Then, in the same methodical manner, Burt coolly proceeds to dump all the logs in the fire at once:

A small wax and sawdust log burned on the grate. A carton of five more sat ready on the hearth. He got up from the sofa and put them all in the fireplace. He watched until they flamed. Then he finished his soda and made for the patio door. On the way, he saw the pies lined up on the sideboard. He stacked them in his arms, all six, one for every ten times she had ever betrayed him.

In the driveway in the dark, he'd let one fall as he fumbled with the door.⁵⁴

Carver's choice of the word "betrayed" is significant. It is a highly charged word, one which strikes a chord, and it becomes doubly resonant when contrasted with the flatness of the rest of the description. We hark back to the opening image of the pie pan on the driveway--"a halo of pumpkin filling on the pavement." The image can now be fully understood.

The juxtaposition of the two descriptions is highly effective, one a delicate and innocuous moment, representative of the family that no longer exists, and what it triggers--a rash display of the suppressed violence Burt harbours toward his wife. Like many of Carver's characters, Burt is suffering from an emotional numbness, reflected in the detached tone of the description. He appears to be unaware of the significance of his actions. The line between violence and everyday behaviour is blurred.

While the reader begins to understand Burt's predicament, he himself is incapable of comprehending, much less confronting, his situation. His conversation with his wife in the kitchen reveals the gulf between them and their inability to face their difficulties. They talk at rather than to each other, and skirt the central issues surging below the deceptively flat surface of the prose:

She looked at him.

"Do you have anything to drink? I could use a drink this morning."

"There's some vodka in the freezer."

"When did you start keeping vodka in the freezer?"

"Don't ask."

"Okay," he said, "I won't ask."

He got out the vodka and poured some into a cup he found on the counter.

She said, "Are you just going to drink it like that, out of a cup?" She said, "Jesus, Burt. What'd you want to talk about, anyway? I told you I have someplace to go. I have a flute lesson at one o'clock."

"Are you still taking flute?"

"I just said so. What is it? Tell me what's on your mind, and then I have to get ready."

"I just wanted to say I was sorry."
 She said, "You said that."
 He said, "If you have any juice, I'll
 mix it with this vodka."
 She opened the refrigerator and moved
 things around.
 "There's cranapple juice," she said.
 "That's fine," he said.
 "I'm going to the bathroom," she
 said.⁵⁵

In Carver's universe, words and actions do not necessarily mesh. Burt feels an urge to reach out to his wife, to talk--in the above passage he gets as far as telling her he's "sorry." But he cannot follow up with more meaningful communication. Instead, he is compelled to express himself through rash acts of violence, as evidenced by the story's final pages. Carver reinterprets what could be the mirror image of the fireplace incident depicted earlier. While Vera is on the phone with her boyfriend, Burt impulsively slashes the telephone cord. Again, the tone is detached and methodical. Less becomes more; the violence of the description is heightened:

He put down the receiver and stood looking at it. He opened the silverware drawer and pushed things around inside. He opened another drawer. He looked in the sink. He went into the dining room and got the carving knife. He held it under hot water until the grease broke and ran off. He wiped the blade on his sleeve. He moved to the phone, doubled the cord, and sawed through without any trouble at all. He examined the ends of the cord. Then he shoved the phone back into its corner behind the roasting pan.⁵⁶

Through violence, Carver's character gain the momentary illusion of control and importance. Yet, for the most

part, life's events seem to swirl around them as they remain powerless and ignorant.

As a parting shot, Burt spies an ashtray, previously described as being from happier times, "bought from a bearded potter on the mall in Santa Clara":

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."⁵⁷

In a sense, the moment seems highly ironic, given Burt and Vera's relationship and their actions so far. Yet Carver's voice is undeniably compassionate. He does not belittle his characters, despite their shortcomings, a trait Carver shares with Richard Ford and Jayne Ann Phillips. (Several of Phillips' stories in Black Tickets strike the opposite note, however. Their depictions of whores and drug addicts seem to be a sensational form of therapy, as she explores her personal obsessions.) Yet Carver's compassion prevents his fiction from succumbing to empty irony. In the final analysis, the moment is far more sad than ironic. For an instant, something of what must have existed between the two of them is shared again. Even Vera's tone of voice is different--pleadingly tender. Burt will not break the ashtray. A tiny vestige of their past has been preserved. However, everything else has been lost and nothing has been accomplished. The real purpose of Burt's visit, a "serious talk," never materializes.

While the violence in "A Serious Talk" is largely symbolic, several other stories in the collection contain references to explicit violence. For example, "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off" contains a murder and a suicide perpetrated by a deaf-mute, literally the ultimate Carver inarticulate. In "Tell the Women We're Going," two young married men, bored with domestic life, pursue two girls out for a ride in the countryside. They end up killing them as easily as a couple of boys might crush ants for sport:

Bill took out a cigarette. But he could not get it lit. Then Jerry showed up. It did not matter after that.

Bill had just wanted to fuck. Or even to see them naked.

On the other hand, it was okay with him if it didn't work out.

He never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock. Jerry used the same rock on both girls, first on the girl called Sharon and then on the one that was supposed to be Bill's.⁵⁸

In "So Much Water So Close to Home," another story that contains suggestions of explicit violence, a man goes on a fishing trip with his friends. One of them spots the body of a murdered girl floating in the river, but they decide not to report it until the fishing weekend is over. The man's wife recounts the story and expresses her horror at his having had sex with her before telling her what had happened that weekend. At a subconscious level, she is afraid that he is in fact the murderer. Sex, her husband's

brutal insensitivity, the capacity for murder--all are linked here:

I was asleep when he got home. But I woke up when I heard him in the kitchen. I found him leaning against the refrigerator with a can of beer. He put his heavy arms around me and rubbed his big hands on my back. In bed he put his hands on me again and then waited as if thinking of something else. I turned and opened my legs. Afterwards, I think he stayed awake.⁵⁹

Taken literally, these stories seem rather unbelievable and the violence gratuitous, yet, as James Atlas observes, ". . . it seems plausible, a reminder that men are violent, primitive, given to murderous lust."⁶⁰

Atlas sees the preponderance of violence in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love and in works by Carver's peers--such as Mary Robison's Oh!, a novel rife with physical violence; Jayne Ann Phillips' Black Tickets, a virtual rogue's gallery of whores, criminals, and addicts; and Richard Ford's The Ultimate Good Luck, a novel about Mexican-American drug trafficking--as the "revolutionary energy" of the sixties surfacing in a different form:

What does all this violence mean? It is as if the revolutionary fervor of the sixties, thwarted in the reactionary period that ensued, had surfaced again in a different form. The blunt fury of the drifters, alcoholics, and psychopaths depicted in these works represents the same impulse once expressed in political demonstrations: a protest against a world perceived to be ever more impersonal, ever more out of control. Hostage to a volatile, dangerous technology, unnerved by the apparent randomness of fate, the bruised characters in a typical Robison or Carver story can articulate their misery only through brutal language and brutal deeds.⁶¹

I suggest that not only does the violence in these stories arise from what Atlas perceives as the thwarted energy of the sixties, it is also a reaction against the idealistic promises of the time and an outdated American dream. It is a blind lashing out by a population faced with shrinking opportunities and the loss (in the upheaval of the previous decades) of the familial, spiritual, and community support enjoyed by previous generations of Americans.

The next three stories I will examine--"Gazebo," "After the Denim," and "The Calm"--are linked both thematically and stylistically. They contrast the quiet dignity of an all-but-forgotten older generation with Carver's contemporary American wasteland. On one level, the stories appear to be more traditional, "realist" writing, containing idiomatic speech and subject matter. However, due to their mythic connotations, they are revealed upon closer scrutiny as more generous versions of Carver's typical mannered technique.

In "Gazebo," a couple whose lives and marriage are on the verge of collapse have a drunken fight in a room of the motel they have been running for the past year. The process of their demise seems inexorable as the narrator describes the start of his affair with a maid who works in the motel:

When we'd first moved down here and taken over as managers, we thought we were out of the woods. Free rent and free utilities plus three hundred a month. You couldn't beat it with a stick.

Holly took care of the books. She was good with figures, and she did most of the renting of the units. She liked people, and people liked her back. I saw to the grounds, mowed the grass and cut weeds, kept the swimming pool clean, did the small repairs.

Everything was fine for the first year. I was holding down another job nights, and we were getting ahead. We had plans. Then one morning, I don't know. I'd just laid some bathroom tile in one of the units when this little Mexican maid comes in to clean. It was Holly had hired her. I can't really say I'd noticed the little thing before, though we spoke when we saw each other. She called me, I remember, Mister.⁶²

In the closing paragraphs we see a glimpse of what used to be, a tender evocation of an irretrievable past:

"Listen," she [Holly] goes, "you remember the time we drove out to that old farm place outside of Yokima, out past Terrace Heights? We were just driving around? We were on this little dirt road and it was hot and dusty? We kept going and came to that old house, and you asked if could we have a drink of water? Can you imagine us doing that now? Going up to a house and asking for a drink of water?"

"Those old people must be dead now," she goes, "side by side out there in some cemetery. You remember they asked us in for cake? And later on they showed us around? And there was this gazebo there out back? It was out back under some trees? It had a little peaked roof and the paint was gone and there were these weeds growing; up over the steps. And the woman said that years before, I mean a real long time ago, men used to come around and play music out there on a Sunday, and the people would sit and listen. I thought we'd be like that too when we got old enough. Dignified. And in a place. And people would come to our door."⁶³

That world--the dignified older couple, the stability and sense of place and rootedness they represent--is dead now, along with the naïve optimism of youth. What remains now is the aftermath, the new wasteland:

I stopped cleaning the pool. It filled up with green gick so that the guests wouldn't use it anymore. I didn't fix any more faucets or lay any more tile or do any of the touch-up painting. Well, the truth is we were both hitting it pretty hard. Booze takes a lot of time and effort if you're going to do a good job with it.⁶⁴

"After the Denim" and "The Calm" also make explicit the contrast between generations. In the former story, an elderly man at a bingo night with his wife is deeply disturbed by the nonchalant good fortune of a young hippie couple. During the bingo match, the man's wife goes to the bathroom, and when she returns she tells him that she is "spotting again."⁶⁵ Later, at home, after she has gone to bed, the elderly man's thoughts return to the young couple:

He smoked and thought of that sauntering, arrogant gait as the two of them moved just ahead. If only they knew. If only someone would tell them. Just once!

He closed his eyes. He would get up early and fix breakfast. He would go with her to see [Dr.] Crawford. If only they had to sit with him in the waiting room! He'd tell them what to expect! He'd set those floozies straight! He'd tell them what was waiting for you after the denim and the earrings, after touching each other and cheating at games.⁶⁶

From these lines we garner that the man's wife may be terminally ill. His fear of death and resentment of the young become the story's central theme.

In the final paragraph, Carver alludes to a picture hanging in the bingo hall mentioned earlier. It is of a man on a capsized fishing boat, waving his arms:

He left the porch light on and went back to the guest room. He pushed aside his knitting basket, took up his basket of embroidery, and then settled himself in the chair. He raised the lid of the basket and got out the metal hoop. There was fresh white linen stretched across it. Holding the tiny needle to the light, James Packer stabbed at the eye with a length of blue silk thread. Then he set to work--stitch after stitch--making believe he was waving like the man on the keel.⁶⁷

The image of the central character, alone with his deadly knowledge, practising his embroidery, evinces both a quiet dignity and feelings of utter helplessness: Carver's summation of a way of life fast fading out of existence.

Finally, in "The Calm," a man getting a haircut overhears a hunter describe how he wounded a deer but failed to track it down, leaving it to die in the woods. The hunter's account becomes the story's central metaphor. We learn that, for reasons which the narrator seems unaware of, it was the catalyst for his decision to leave his wife:

That was in Crescent City, California, up near the Oregon border. I left soon after. But today I was thinking of that place, of Crescent City, and of how I was trying out a new life there with my wife, and how, in the barber's chair that morning, I had made up my mind to go. I was thinking today about the calm I felt when I closed my eyes and let the

barber's fingers move through my hair, the sweetness of those fingers, the hair already starting to grow.⁶⁸

The title and the narrator's feeling of "calm" are highly ironic given the brutality of the story he has overheard and what he has decided to do. He is revealed as another of Carver's emotionally numb and inarticulate people.

However, when analyzed within the context of stories like "Gazebo" and "After the Denim," "The Calm" is also making a larger statement about the contrast of generations within Carver's America. While the hunter is telling his story, an older man waiting for a haircut eventually confronts him:

The older man put his cigarette out and turned to the guard. He drew a breath and said, "You ought to be out there right now looking for that deer instead of in here getting a haircut."

"You can't talk like that," the guard said. "You old fart. I've seen you someplace."⁶⁹

Later, the barber comments about the old man:

"Albert's about dead from emphysema," the barber said from the window. "We used to fish together. He taught me salmon inside out. The women. They used to crawl all over that old boy. He's picked up a temper, though. But in all honesty, there was provocation."⁷⁰

The fundamental breach of the hunter's code becomes symbolic of the larger breach, between the decayed values and moral looseness of Carver's contemporary wasteland and the doomed way of life of another time.

The final story I will discuss, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," contrasts with the stories examined so far in several ways. The narrator, Nick, describes an afternoon with his wife Laura and their friends Mel and his wife Terri. They sit around the kitchen table drinking gin and talking about the "subject of love." Compared with the inarticulate, withdrawn individuals described in previous stories, these people (especially Mel) seem positively garrulous. The story is also more generous with detail, and, at twenty pages, significantly longer than the others in the collection. Thematically, however, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" is very much in keeping with the other stories. The story is about transience in people's lives and emotions. It is also about the longing for security and stability, and the fear that results when these needs cannot be met. And, finally, the story is about talking itself.

The narrator tells us that each of the characters is "from somewhere else." They have all been previously married or have lived with other people. They share the rootless and transient lives typical of Carver's Americans.

It soon becomes apparent that they all have different concepts of love. Love, rather than being "the absolute" Mel insists it is, will be revealed as something that can only come from the individual's own personal

experience. Terri describes the man she lived with before she married Mel. She says that "he loved her so much he tried to kill her":

"He beat me up one night. He dragged me around the living room by my ankles. He kept saying, 'I love you, I love you, you bitch.' He went on dragging me around the living room. My head kept knocking on things." Terri looked around the table. "What do you do with love like that?"⁷¹

When she leaves him, he eventually kills himself after several gruesome attempts:

"It was love," Terri said. "Sure it's abnormal in most people's eyes. But he was willing to die for it. He did die for it."⁷²

Mel counters by describing what he believes love should be. He relates an incident he witnessed while on call one night at the hospital. An old couple is brought in after being hit by a drunken teenager driving his father's pickup truck. Miraculously, they both survive. Mel holds up the man's devotion as defining ideal love:

"Well, the husband was very depressed for the longest while. Even after he found out that his wife was going to pull through, he was still very depressed. Not about the accident, though. I mean, the accident was one thing, but it wasn't everything. I'd get up to his mouthhole, you know, and he'd say no, it wasn't the accident exactly but it was because he couldn't see her through his eyeholes. He said that was what was making him feel so bad. Can you imagine? I'm telling you, the man's heart was breaking because he couldn't turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife."

Mel looked around the table and shook his head at what he was going to say.

"I mean, it was killing the old fart just because he couldn't look at the fucking woman."

We all looked at Mel.
 "Do you see what I'm saying?" he
 said.⁷⁴

The above stories within the story (the couples' definitions of love) become the two poles around which the narrative revolves. "What We Talk About . . ." is the most complex example so far of Carver's typical pattern: from the most basic and "normal" of activities--in this case, two couples sitting around a table, conversing and drinking gin--Carver creates a story that will probe large and important realities. We sense that something momentous will be revealed as their inhibitions lessen and they unwittingly address their deepest fears.

After listening to Terri's story, Mel proposes to explain what "real love" is. However, before he actually gets to his story, he asks, "What do any of us really know about love?" He proceeds to answer his own question:

"It seems to me we're just beginners at love. We say we love each other and we do, I don't doubt it. I love Terri and Terri loves me, and you guys love each other too. You know the kind of love I'm talking about now. Physical love, the impulse that drives you to someone special, as well as love of the other person's being, his or her essence, as it were. Carnal love and, well, call it sentimental love, the day-to-day caring about the other person. But sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife too. But I did, I know I did. So I suppose I am like Terri in that regard. Terri and Ed." He thought about it and then he went on. "There was a time when I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself. But now I hate her guts. I do. How do you explain that? What happened to that love? What happened to it, is what I'd like to know. I wish someone could tell me."⁷⁴

All of the characters fear the transitory nature of love and attachment which Mel speaks of. Terri's gestures reveal what she does not articulate: "Terri looked at us and then back at Mel. She seemed anxious, or maybe that's too strong a word." She is nervous, worried about him.

Similarly, the narrator and his wife play at little non-verbal lovers' games to reassure themselves of their affection for one another.

I touched the back of Laura's hand. She gave me a quick smile. I picked up Laura's hand. It was warm, the nails polished, perfectly manicured. I encircled the broad wrist with my fingers, and I held her.⁷⁵

Yet, as Terri says, they are only on the "honeymoon."

Things change:

"You guys," Terri said. "Stop that now. You're making me sick. You're still on the honeymoon, for God's sake. You're still gaga, for crying out loud. Just wait. How long have you been together now? How long has it been? A year? Longer than a year?"

"Going on a year and a half," Laura said, flushed and smiling.

"Oh, now," Terri said. "Wait a while."

She held her drink and gazed at Laura.

"I'm only kidding," Terri said.⁷⁶

Ironically, the devotion that Mel speaks of in his story about the old couple is something that is out of his reach. Already we see the seeds of anger and conflict which will most likely result in him and Terry eventually separating, as he has separated from his first wife. Presumably, we are to assume that the same thing will also happen to the narrator and his wife.

The use of the sun as a metaphor further reinforces the theme of the transitory nature of love of Carver's world. From the opening paragraph we are made aware that "Sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink." As the characters become immersed in their conversation, "The afternoon sun was like a presence in this room, the spacious light of ease and generosity." Then the light begins to fade: "The light was draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from. Yet nobody made a move to get up from the table to turn on the overhead light." Like love, the sunlight will fade and finally be extinguished:

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.⁷⁸

The final moment conveys a mood both foreboding and transcendental. We are left with a sense of fear and apprehension, yet we also sense that the narrator appears to be aware that a form of communion has taken place. For the first time, there is something like an epiphany here, anticipating the stories in Cathedral. The "human noise they sat there making"--the act of talking itself--somehow binds them together in their common humanity, even if they are destined to grow apart from each other. Talk is seen as a basic human need which must have its expression.

To sum up, when compared with Carver's earlier work, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love is, in his own words, "a much more self-conscious book in the sense of how intentional every move was, how calculated." The collection also represents the apex of Carver's lean or minimalist style: "[It is] as far as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone."⁷⁸

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love is a more unified collection than the first book. The effect of the stories is cumulative. The overlapping themes of break-up, frustrated communication, and the contrast between generations resonate in the reader's mind more than any one individual story.

Like Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, the stories in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love strike me as less "dirty realism" than modern American fables. In both books, the emotions conveyed are real, yet the characters and situations are often highly stylized and intentionally contrived. As a result of the above, and the "transformation process" alluded to in my introduction, the stories simultaneously address real life while appearing larger than life. "Why Don't You Dance?" is, if anything, more surreal than "belly-side realism." And stories like "Gazebo," "After the Denim," and "The Calm," while appearing more idiomatic and down to earth, are, in the

final analysis, contemporary fables lamenting the loss of a mythic American past or golden era.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love also expresses a central theme hinted at in Carver's earlier work, but only fully realized in this collection. The stories' subject matter and relentlessly pared-down prose is a cry of bleakness mirroring the bleak landscape of Carver's America. It is a nightmarish world where a sense of emotional numbing permeates everything, including language. Hope, dynamism, even the family--the most basic of institutions--are all myths of the past associated with an American dream long dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cathedral

In a recent essay, "Less is Less," Madison Bell criticizes the work of Carver, Beattie, Barthelme, Mason, and others as little more than deftly written attempts to capture a share of the mass market. Ultimately, Bell considers the writing to be devoid of any real substance: "The new short story writers share a familiar spareness of style which suggests there is not too much to be said but too little."⁷⁹ In reference to Carver's Cathedral, Bell argues:

Each story in Cathedral stands or falls on its extreme understatement. In stories like "A Small, Good Thing" (in which parents struggle with the accidental death of their child, this method is a suitable means of mediating subjects that might otherwise be unbearable or, in literary terms, sentimental). But in too many cases the subjects are so trivial as to verge upon non-existence, and the policy of understatement only suggests that they do not deserve much comment.⁸⁰

I intend to refute Bell's thesis through my analysis of the following stories in Cathedral: "Where I'm Calling From," "A Small, Good Thing," "Feathers," and "Cathedral." In addition, I intend to demonstrate that Cathedral

represents a significant evolution in form and content from Carver's earlier work.

"Where I'm Calling From" describes the world of "Frank Martin's drying-out facility" for alcoholics. It is an environment where life is in a constant state of limbo; the slightest upsetting of the delicate balance can send things crashing down at a moment's notice. The story takes the form of the narrator recalling a conversation with a fellow patient at the facility, J.P., whom he has recently met. The narrator speaks in measured tones. Each word and pause belie the precariousness of his situation. His speech is careful, reticent--lest he fall over the edge:

We've only been in here a couple of days.
We're not out of the woods yet. J.P. has
these shakes, and every so often a
nerve--maybe it isn't a nerve, but it's
something--begins to jerk in my shoulder.
Sometimes it's at the side of my neck. When
this happens, my mouth dries up. It's an
effort just to swallow then. I know
something's about to happen and I want to
head it off. I want to hide from it, that's
what I want to do. Just close my eyes and
let it pass by, let it take the next man.
J.P. can wait a minute.⁸¹

In "Where I'm Calling From," two stories are being told: the narrator's and J.P.'s. As in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the act of talking is important. It draws the two men out from their contracted inner worlds. Moreover, J.P.'s account (the story within the story) motivates the narrator to consider the pieces of his

own life. This is a departure from earlier Carver stories, in which the past, if it is addressed at all, is only hinted at through the most oblique references--as in "Why Don't You Dance?" for example.

"Where I'm Calling From," Anne Tyler observes in her introduction to the anthology The Best American Short Stories 1983, "almost physically transports us, settling us in the center of its sad little ingrown society and then, in one splendid leap, lifting us out again."⁸² The world of the drying-out facility, "the sad little ingrown society," is made vivid by Carver's easy, matter-of-fact descriptions of mealtimes and nicked chins:

Tiny's hair was damp and was slicked back along the sides of his head. He'd just come out of the shower. He'd also nicked himself on the chin with his razor. But so what? Just about everybody at Frank Martin's has nicks on his face. It's something that happens.⁸³

The narrator tells us that Tiny had suffered a seizure that morning. The narrator, like the other members of the "ingrown society," thinks of the seizure in personal terms. It is something that could easily happen to him:

I'd like to ask him if he had any signal just before it happened. I'd like to know if he felt his ticker skip a beat, or else begin to race. Did his eyelid twitch? But I'm not about to say anything. He doesn't look like he's hot to talk about it, anyway. But what happened to Tiny is something I won't ever forget. Old Tiny flat on the floor, kicking his heels. So every time this little flutter starts up anywhere, I draw some breath and wait to find myself on my back, looking up, somebody's fingers in my mouth.⁸⁴

The claustrophobia and sense of helplessness associated with the facility prompt J.P. to recall the time he was trapped inside a well as a child. The incident becomes a metaphor for the world of the drying-out facility, life as it is now.

The story's "splendid leap" takes the form of the narrator recalling J.P.'s account of how he met his wife Roxy, a woman chimney sweep. In what represents another significant departure for Carver, we are momentarily transported from his characteristic bleak landscape:

She tells J.P.'s friend that she has an appointment to clean the fireplace. The friend lets her in and bows. The young woman doesn't pay him any mind. She spreads a blanket on the hearth and lays out her gear. She's wearing these black pants, black shirt, black shoes and socks. Of course, by now she's taken her hat off. J.P. says it nearly drove him nuts to look at her. She does the work, she cleans the chimney, while J.P. and his friend play records and drink beer. But they watch her and they watch what she does. Now and then J.P. and his friend look at each other and grin, or else they wink. They raise their eyebrows when the upper half of the young woman disappears into the chimney. She was all-right-looking, too, J.P. said.⁸⁵

J.P.'s story indeed turns around understatement--as in the final sentence of the above passage: "She was all-right-looking, too." Yet, contrary to Bell's thesis, Roxy's characterization is far from flat. She could have stepped out of a fairy tale with her top hat, brush, and chimney-sweep outfit. It is not difficult to see why she sets J.P.'s "legs atremble":

It was something that was out of his hands. Nothing else in the world counted for anything. He knew he'd met somebody who could set his legs atremble. He could feel her kiss still burning on his lips, etc. J.P. couldn't begin to sort anything out. He was filled with sensations that were carrying him every which way.⁸⁶

Roxy becomes all the more remarkable when the narrator returns to the present and describes her visit to the "drying-out facility" and the "good-luck" kiss she gives him. Roxy's compassion, integrity, and vitality illuminate the bleakness of the "facility." It is as if she can barely be contained in the few paragraphs Carver devotes to her:

She moves over. She takes me by the shoulders. "I'm a big man--and she plants this kiss on my lips. "How's that?" she says. "That's fine," I say. "Nothing to it," she says. She's still holding me by the shoulders. She's looking me right in the eyes. "Good luck," she says, and then she lets go of me.⁸⁷

The ordinary gesture of a kiss and the word "luck"--literally what the narrator needs most in his precarious state--take on a special resonance within the context of the story.

Listening to J.P.'s story enables the narrator to face the painful aspects of his own life. It is only in the final pages that he tells of his past. We learn that he is separated from his wife, and of how he and his girlfriend drove up to Frank Martin's, both drunk. Her story has the makings of another "low-rent tragedy":

The reason I felt sorry for her was that on the day before Christmas her Pap smear came

back, and the news was not cheery. She'd have to go back to the doctor, and real soon. That kind of news was reason enough for both of us to start drinking. So what we did was get ourselves good and drunk. And on Christmas Day we were still drunk.⁸⁸

For his part, the alcoholic narrator cannot help his girlfriend deal with her problems or face their difficulties together. Like most of Carver's characters, he is only able to retreat.

Employing a device used in "Gazebo" and "Everything Stuck to Him," Carver has the narrator recall a special morning with his wife when times were better:

I push the curtain away from the window. Outside, this old guy in white coveralls is standing next to his ladder. The sun is just starting to break above the mountains. The old guy and I look each other over. It's the landlord, all right--this old guy in coveralls. But his coveralls are too big for him. He needs a shave, too. And he's wearing this baseball cap to cover his bald head. Goddamn it, I think, if he isn't a weird old fellow. And a wave of happiness comes over me that I'm not him--that I'm me and that I'm inside this bedroom with my wife.

He jerks his thumb toward the sun. He pretends to wipe his forehead. He's letting me know he doesn't have all that much time. The old fart breaks into a grin. It's then I realize I'm naked. I look down at myself. I look at him again and shrug. What did he expect?

My wife laughs. "Come on," she says. "Get back in this bed. Right now. This minute. Come back to bed."

I let go of the curtain. But I keep standing there at the window. I can see the old fellow nod to himself like he's saying, "Go on, sonny, go back to bed. I understand."⁸⁹

Finally, in the last paragraph, Carver returns to the world of Frank Martin's. The above passage is

contrasted with a particularly arresting image. The narrator recalls a Jack London story he read in high school (earlier, we learn that London was another victim of alcoholism):

I try to remember if I ever read any Jack London books. I can't remember. But there was a story of his I read in high school. "To Build a Fire," it was called. This guy in the Yukon is freezing. Imagine it--he's actually going to freeze to death if he can't get a fire going. With a fire, he can dry his socks and things and warm himself.

He gets his fire going, but then something happens to it. A branchful of snow drops on it. It goes out. Meanwhile, it's getting colder. Night is coming on.⁹⁰

"Where I'm Calling From" therefore revolves around two polar images: the image of Roxy in her chimney-sweep outfit--the story's "splendid leap"--and the final image, a metaphor for the utter precariousness of life in the alcoholic's world. Yet perhaps the most significant aspect of the story, when compared with Carver's earlier work, is that through the device of J.P.'s story within a story, Carver allows his narrator to grow, rather than remaining a symbol of stasis within a bleak and hopeless universe. Roxy's love, devotion, and strength in the face of extreme adversity (rare qualities given Carver's typical landscape of transients and emotional cripples) somehow inspires the narrator to call his wife. He is taking his first, albeit tentative, steps toward recovery:

I bring some change out of my pocket. I'll try my wife first. If she answers, I'll wish her a Happy New Year. But that's it. I won't bring up business. I won't raise my

voice. Not even if she starts something. She'll ask me where I'm calling from, and I'll have to tell her. I won't say anything about New Year's resolutions. There's no way to make a joke out of this. After I talk to her, I'll call my girlfriend. Maybe I'll call her first. I'll just have to hope I don't get her kid on the line. "Hello, sugar," I'll say when she answers. "It's me."⁹¹

Carver's compassion toward his characters is especially striking in this story and is one of the main reasons I view his work as transcending some of the criticisms levelled against other so-called dirty realist writers--that the writing is cold, distant, impersonal, and so on. In all of Carver's stories we sense his compassion. Even in "They're Not Your Husband" and "A Serious Talk," in which the style is deliberately detached, Carver's skillful use of the artifice of detachment paradoxically makes the very real emotions conveyed all the more powerful.

The second story I will examine, "A Small, Good Thing," first appeared in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love as "The Bath." The version included in Cathedral is in fact a radically different story. I intend to compare the stories in order to shed some light on the evolution of Carver's technique and vision in Cathedral.

In his review of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, James Atlas observes: ". . . Too often Carver

seems determined to limit himself, as if in obedience to some vow of simplicity. . . . In his most effective stories, though, Carver relaxes this stringent technique, becomes more anecdotal and leisurely."⁹² Atlas could very well be describing why "A Small, Good Thing" is a more successful story than "The Bath." In my analysis of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love I chose to focus on the most effective examples of Carver's pared-down style.

"The Bath," however, is one story in which this technique falls short.

Both stories describe a young couple's waking nightmare: on his eighth birthday, their son is struck down by a hit-and-run driver while on his way to school. Initially, Carver's descriptions are almost exaggeratedly factual and realistic. The style mirrors the couple's response to the crisis. In a state of shock, they are hyper-alert, their focus reduced to the immediate situation.

In "The Bath," however, Carver's minimalism appears to have drawn in on itself. This is one story in which his use of "detachment" fails. The story does not transform; it leaves us cold and distant. "A Small, Good Thing" is more generous. Subtle details have been added which humanize the characters enough to allow us to identify with them. Compare the opening paragraphs of the stories:

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. 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.⁹³ ("The Bath")

Saturday afternoon she 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. The cake she chose was decorated with a spaceship and launching pad under a sprinkling of white stars, and a planet made of red frosting at the other end. The name SCOTTY would be iced on in green letters beneath the planet.⁹⁴ ("A Small Good Thing")

In the first version of the story, the woman character is addressed generally; she is held at arm's length from the reader by her status as "the mother." The second version is more intimate. By addressing his character as "she," Carver brings us directly into her world.

The description of the accident has also been revised:

At an intersection, without looking, the birthday boy stepped off the curb, and was promptly knocked down by a car. He fell on his side, his head in the gutter, his legs in the road moving as if he were climbing a wall.

The other boy stood holding the potato chips. He was wondering if he should finish the rest or continue on to school.⁹⁵ ("The Bath")

Without looking, the birthday boy stepped off the curb at an intersection and was immediately knocked down by a car. He fell on his side with his head in the gutter and his legs out in the road. His eyes were

closed, but his legs moved back and forth as if he were trying to climb over something. His friend dropped the potato chips and started to cry.⁹⁶ ("A Small Good Thing")

In the second version, the victim's friend has what seems to be a more natural reaction to the accident: he "starts to cry" instead of wondering whether he should finish the rest of his potato chips and continue on to school.

Carver depicts a situation with which most of us are unfamiliar, yet it is undoubtedly one of our most dreaded fantasies--an aspect of Sheppard's "mythology of the heart." The scenario probes our deepest fears, as well as piquing our morbid curiosity. In the revised version of the story, tension is established, whereas in "The Bath" we sense that something has been left out. After the boy has been taken to hospital, we allow ourselves to become directly involved in the characters' vigil. Like the couple in the story, we hang on to the doctor's every word and gesture:

"Let's just first see how he's doing," the doctor said. He moved to the side of the bed and took the boy's pulse. He peeled back one eyelid and then the other. Howard and Ann stood beside the doctor and watched. Then the doctor turned back the covers and listened to the boy's heart and lungs with his stethoscope. He pressed his fingers here and there on the abdomen. When he was finished, he went to the end of the bed and studied the chart. He noted the time, scribbled something on the chart, and then looked at Howard and Ann.

"Doctor, how is he?" Howard said.
 "What's the matter with him exactly?"

"Why doesn't he wake up?" Ann said.⁹⁷
 ("A Small Good Thing").

The lengthy description of the doctor's mysterious examination, followed by the couple's simple questions, conveys a sense of urgency and emotion which is conspicuously lacking in the earlier version:

The doctor came in. He looked tanned and healthier than ever. He went to the bed and examined the boy. He said, "His signs are fine. Everything's good."

The mother said, "But he's sleeping."

"Yes," the doctor said.

The husband said, "She's tired. She's starved."

The doctor said, "She should rest. She should eat. Ann," the doctor said.

"Thank you," the husband said.

He shook hands with the doctor and the doctor patted their shoulders and left.⁹⁸
("The Bath")

As the ordeal wears on, the mood of the revised story, in keeping with the protagonists' growing physical and mental exhaustion, becomes tinged with Carver's familiar understated surrealism. This is brought about through a series of bizarre phone calls, some at inexplicable hours of the day and night, made by the baker whom the boy's mother enlisted to bake a birthday cake for her son before the accident. In neither story are we provided with much of the baker's character when we first meet him. Yet in "A Small, Good Thing" there is enough to stimulate our curiosity. We wonder why he is so abrupt and what is behind his strange manner.

It is at this point that Carver radically alters the second version of the story. In "The Bath," the story ends with the boy lapsing into a coma, while in "A Small, Good

Thing," he dies from his injuries. Husband and wife return home from the hospital after the tragedy has taken its ultimate course and finally realize that it is the baker who has been making the phone calls.

But now, in what represents a departure from the stories examined to date, there will be a breakthrough--an epiphany of sorts. The baker, who up to this point has been seen solely through the eyes of the devastated couple, is revealed to have a more human side. The second version of the story, in Irving Howe's words, "transforms the baker from an abstract evil Force into a flawed human creature."⁹⁹ When the couple confronts him, we learn of his loneliness and difficulty in communicating with others. His strange phone calls become more plausible when we realize that this is a man cut off from the rest of society, a man in his own sad world:

"Let me say how sorry I am," the baker said, putting his elbows on the table. "God alone knows how sorry. Listen to me. I'm just a baker. I don't claim to be anything else. Maybe once, maybe years ago, I was a different kind of human being. . . . I don't have any children myself, so I can only imagine what you must be feeling. All I can say to you now is that I'm sorry. Forgive me, if you can," the baker said. "I'm not an evil man, I don't think. Not evil, like you said on the phone. You got to understand what it comes down to is I don't know how to act anymore, it would seem."¹⁰⁰ ("A Small Good Thing")

In the closing paragraphs, the tenderness of the description and the give and take of their conversation

(as the baker tells the couple of his "loneliness" and "sense of doubt and limitation") convey the significance of human interaction in the face of such an overwhelming tragedy:

He served them warm cinnamon rolls just out of the oven, the icing still runny. He put butter on the table and knives to spread the butter. . . .

They ate rolls and drank coffee. Ann was suddenly hungry, and the rolls were warm and sweet. She ate three of them, which pleased the baker. Then he began to talk. They listened carefully. Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years.

"Smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich." They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.¹⁰¹ ("A Small Good Thing")

The symbolic gesture of sharing the bread--a "small, good thing"--represents the sort of affirmation, albeit in the bleakest of circumstances, entirely absent in earlier stories.

The title story, "Cathedral," was Carver's first story written after the publication of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love and is fittingly the centrepiece of

the collection. Like "A Small, Good Thing" and "Where I'm Calling From," "Cathedral" is longer and more generous with detail than earlier Carver stories. The story introduces another truly memorable character, comparable in energy and life-affirming vitality to Roxy in "Where I'm Calling From," and succeeds in transporting the reader, in an equally "splendid leap," out from Carver's typical bleak landscape. In "Cathedral," however, the leap occurs in the closing paragraphs and becomes the story's signature.

"Cathedral," like most of Carver's fiction, revolves around the transformation of a seemingly small event into something momentous. The characters are familiar: a couple trapped within the monotony of their daily lives and a troubled marriage. The "event" takes the form of a visit from a friend of the narrator's wife, Robert, a blind man for whom she used to work before she was married.

In the opening passages, the narrator's breezy description of his wife's previous marriage and attempted suicide reveals the extent of his emotional numbness and effectively distances him from the reader:

My wife's officer was posted to one base and then another. She sent tapes from Moody AFB, McGuire, McConnell, and finally Travis, near Sacramento, where one night she got to feeling lonely and cut off from people she kept losing in that moving-around life. She got to feeling she couldn't go it another step. She went in and swallowed all the pills and capsules in the medicine chest and washed them down with a bottle of gin. Then she got into a hot bath and passed out.

But instead of dying, she got sick. She threw up. Her officer--why should he have a name? he was the childhood sweetheart, and what more does he want?--came home from somewhere, found her, and called the ambulance. In time, she put it all on tape and sent the tape to the blind man. Over the years, she put all kinds of stuff on tapes and sent the tapes off lickety-split. Next to writing a poem every year, I think it was her chief means of recreation.¹⁰²

The narrator appears jaded and rather insensitive. Dissatisfied with his job and bored with life, he retreats into pot-smoking and TV-watching. We learn that he and his wife "hardly went to bed at the same time" and that "every night he smoked dope and stayed up as long as he could before falling asleep." Any dialogue between them only results in exasperation.

Robert is a messenger. He will attempt to connect with his counterpart and draw him out from his narrow, claustrophobic world. In contrast to Carver's earlier stories, however, real communication and a true human bond will be achieved. After sharing dinner and some marijuana, the narrator's wife falls asleep on the sofa. Robert and the narrator remain awake with the TV on, tuned to a documentary on cathedrals. While watching the program, it occurs to him that Robert would have no concept of what a cathedral actually looks like. Accordingly, he attempts to describe a cathedral, but soon runs into difficulty. Finally, Robert suggests that they draw one--together. In contrast to the sense of distance evoked in the story's opening pages, the prose is breathless and intimate,

mirroring the newfound intimacy between Robert and the narrator:

He found my hand, the hand with the pen. He closed his hand over my hand. "Go ahead, bub, draw," he said. "Draw. you'll see. I'll follow along with you. It'll be okay. Just begin now like I'm telling you. You'll see. Draw," the blind man said.

So I began. First I drew a box that looked like a house. It could have been the house I lived in. Then I put a roof on it. At either end of the roof, I drew spires. Crazy.

"Swell," he said. "Terrific. You're doing fine," he said. "Never thought anything like this could happen in your lifetime, did you, bub? Well, it's a strange life, we all know that. Go on now. Keep it up."

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 that I had drawn, and he nodded.¹⁰³

In typical Carver fashion, the story ends with a powerful sensual image. In "Cathedral," however, the final image is one of hope and possibility, as opposed to the images of fear, danger, and uncertainty depicted in stories as diverse as "The Ducks," "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," and "Where I'm Calling From":

My wife said, "What's going on? Robert, what are you doing? What's going on?"

"It's all right," he said to her.

"Close your eyes now," the blind man said to me.

I did it. I closed them just like he said.

"Are they closed?" he said. Don't fudge."

"They're closed," I said.

"Keep them that way," he said. He said, "Don't stop now. Draw."

So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now.

Then he said, "I think that's it. I think you got it," he said. "Take a look. What do you think?"

But I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little while longer. I thought it was something I ought to do.

"Well?" he said. "Are you looking?"

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.¹⁰⁴

The narrator is able to break free from his indifference and emotional numbness. He has gained the capacity for empathy. Earlier, during the meal, the narrator makes a joke out of saying grace. But Robert appears to take it seriously at first, implying that he is indeed religious.

"Now let us pray," I said, and the blind man lowered his head. My wife looked at me, her mouth agape. "Pray the phone won't ring and the food doesn't get cold," I said.¹⁰⁵

Clearly, the tone of the story is different in the final pages. As in the closing passages of "A Small, Good Thing," the moment fairly glows with an almost spiritual quality, revealed through the tenderness of the description and the primal bond Robert and the narrator share. This spiritual quality does not necessarily pertain to any organized religion, however, even if it has been brought about by the drawing of a cathedral. I believe that the

moment and the title "Cathedral" stand for something more general. Robert is blind, yet he is able to see with an inner eye. Through their contact, the narrator is lifted from his drab, constricted world and is finally able to experience a sense of wonder and a heightened consciousness.

While "Cathedral" is clearly the most optimistic story in the collection, several of the stories, notably "Preservation," "Chef's House," "Vitamins," and "Feathers" still express Carver's familiar bleak vision.

"Preservation" is perhaps the paradigmatic example of Carver's treatment of themes of stasis and utter hopelessness--an unemployed man takes to spending his days lying on the couch, oblivious to his life collapsing around him. And in "Chef's House," the closing lines; ". . . and that will be the end of it,"¹⁰⁶ sum up a couple's brief attempt at rekindling a broken marriage--an effort destined for failure.

The two other stories, "Vitamins" and "Feathers," contrast a more generous, idiomatic version of Carver's mannered, pared-down dialogue with an understated surreal atmosphere. In the former story, a man's botched tryst precipitates a disturbing vision as he confronts his wife while she is having a dream:

. . . Things rolled into the sink. "Where's the aspirin?" I said. I knocked down some more things. I didn't care. Things kept falling.¹⁰⁷

Clearly, the moment has assumed a quality quite different from "dirty" or literal realism. Its power is derived chiefly from its surreal and nightmarish aspects.

In "Feathers," there are indications of hope and possibility (for one of the couples at least) and a rich landscape unlike anything in the earlier books. In the story, the narrator recalls the time, years before, when he and his wife Fran--a "big tall drink of water with blond hair that hangs down her back"--were over at a co-worker's house for dinner. At first, the visit is like something out of a freak show. They are greeted by the couple's pet peacock, come face to face with a plaster cast of deformed teeth sitting on top of the TV, and meet the couple's hideously ugly baby. We learn that the teeth are to remind the woman, Olla, "how much she owes" her husband, Bud, who paid to get them fixed.

Yet, as the evening progresses, things begin to seem less strange. Fran holds the baby and plays with it while her husband watches. The evening has made an impression on them. The narrator feels that it was "special": "That evening I felt good about almost everything in my life."¹⁰⁸ Fran now wants to have a baby too:

After we got home from Bud and Olla's that night, and we were under the covers, Fran said, "Honey, fill me up with your seed!" When she said that, I heard her all the way down to my toes, and I hollered and let go.¹⁰⁹

Like "Cathedral," "Feathers" expresses the Chekhovian theme of finding solace in small, everyday human interaction. However, "Feathers" is still ultimately a fable about "erosion," a familiar topic in Carver's fiction and is very much anchored in Carver's "post-American-dream" landscape. In the final paragraphs, the narrator observes:

Fran doesn't work at the creamery anymore, and she cut her hair a long time ago. She's gotten fat on me, too. We don't talk about it. What's to say?

Once in a blue moon, he [Bud] asks about my family. When he does, I tell him everybody's fine. "Everybody's fine," I say. I close the lunch pail and take out my cigarettes. Bud nods and sips his coffee. The truth is, my kid has a conniving streak in him. But I don't talk about it. Not even with his mother. Especially her. She and I talk less and less as it is. Mostly it's just the TV. But I remember that night. I recall the way the peacock picked up its gray feet and inched around the table. And then my friend and his wife saying goodnight to us on the porch. I remember all of us shaking hands, hugging each other, saying things. In the car, Fran sat close to me as we drove away. She kept her hand on my leg. We drove home like that from my friend's house.¹¹⁰

To conclude, Cathedral represents an "opening up" for Carver in terms of both form and content. In Carver's own words:

["Cathedral" is] totally different in conception and execution from any stories that have come before. I suppose it reflects a change in my life as much as it does in my way of writing. . . . There was an opening up when I wrote the story. I knew I'd gone as far the other way as I could or wanted to go;

cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone. Any farther in that direction and I'd be at a dead end. . . . But all of the stories in the new book, the one called "Cathedral," were written within an eighteen-month period; and in every one of them I feel this difference.¹¹¹

For the first time, Carver's characters experience more traditional forms of epiphany, as opposed to the "negative" epiphany of previous collections. And whereas stories like "Viewfinder" and "Why Don't You Dance?" revolve around a series of oblique gestures and inferences; gesture--in the form of sharing bread in "A Small, Good Thing" or tracing a drawing in "Cathedral"--is now clearly related to achieved rather than frustrated communication.

Two stories, "Where I'm Calling From" and "Cathedral," stand alone. They are, in my opinion, Carver's most sophisticated work. Whereas the earlier stories are, in a sense, exercises in a particular form--the "contemporary American fable"--"Cathedral" and "Where I'm Calling From" combine fable with a more natural and more fully realized narrative structure.

Contrary to Madison Bell's thesis, I believe that Carver has succeeded in creating memorable characters, particularly with stories like "Where I'm Calling From," "A Small, Good Thing," "Feathers," and "Cathedral." Surely, the situations depicted in the above stories are anything but "trivial." It is my opinion that the stories in Cathedral, far from being "facelessly uniform" and existing as "different shades of nothing," contain a marked variety

of subtlety and nuance despite sharing Carver's characteristic "policy of understatement." Rather than suggesting that "they [the situations] do not deserve much comment," I believe that Carver's understated prose not only enhances the stories' impact, but is perhaps the only suitable method of dealing with their elusive subject matter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

In this study, my intent has been to trace Raymond Carver's development from his early works to Cathedral, his most recent collection of short stories. In order to shed light on the evolution of Carver's technique and subject matter, the paradigmatic elements of a typical Carver story have been discussed with respect to Carver's three collections of fiction.

Contrary to what has emerged as a rather loose critical consensus, I do not view Carver's writing as literal or, to use Bill Buford's term, "dirty realism." Due to their surreal qualities and Carver's compassionate voice, I believe that the stories are, instead, highly ~~manipulated~~ fables in which the most basic human dilemmas are couched within ordinary situations. The stories simultaneously address real life while appearing larger than life. The emotions are real, not necessarily the characters.

Carver's stories tap into a universal mythology akin to Sam Sheppard's "mythology out of the guts of man," and transform ordinary detail into momentous realities. It is

this "transformation" process that gives his stories their stark power. As Picasso observes of the visual arts:

There are painters who transform the Sun into a yellow spot, but there are others who, with the help of their art and their intelligence, transform a yellow spot into a Sun.¹¹²

It is fitting that in his closing statement in the Paris Review interview, Carver himself considers the aesthetic aspect of his work its most significant component:

The days are gone, if they were ever with us, when a novel or a play or a book of poems could change people's ideas about the world they lived in or even about themselves. Maybe writing fiction about particular kinds of people living particular kinds of lives will allow certain areas of life to be understood a little better than they were before. But I'm afraid that's it, at least as far as I'm concerned. . . . Good fiction is partly bringing of the news from one world to another. That end is good in and of itself, I think. But changing things through fiction, changing somebody's political affiliation or the political system itself, or saving the whales or the redwood trees, no. . . . And I don't think it should have to do any of those things, either. It doesn't have to do anything. It just has to be there for the fierce pleasure we take in doing it, and the different pleasure that's taken in reading something that's durable and made to last, as well as beautiful in and of itself. Something that throws off these sparks--a persistent and steady glow, however dim.¹¹³

To write about the struggles of ordinary people and to do it well--to elevate it to the status of art--is, in my view, Carver's major achievement and greatest contribution.

NOTES

¹ Raymond Carver, Fires (New York: Random House, 1984), 196.

² Carver, Fires, 196.

³ Bruce Weber, "Raymond Carver: A Chronicler of Blue-Collar Despair," The New York Times Magazine, June 1984, rpt. in The New York Times Biographical Service, 770.

⁴ Irving Howe, "Stories of Our Loneliness," rev. of Cathedral, The New York Times Book Review, 11 Sep. 1983, 42.

⁵ Carver, Fires, 24-25.

⁶ Weber, "Raymond Carver," 771.

⁷ Bill Buford, "Editorial," Granta 8 (1983), 4.

⁸ James Atlas, "Less is Less," The Atlantic June 1981, 98.

⁹ Richard Ford, Rock Springs (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 27.

¹⁰ Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 70.

¹¹ Carver, Fires, 17.

¹² Samuel G. Freedman, "Sam Sheppard's Mythic Vision of the Family," The New York Times, 1 Dec. 1985, Sec. 2, p. 20, col. 1.

¹³ M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, fourth ed. (New York: Hold Rinehart and Winston, 1981), 54.

¹⁴ Raymond Carver, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 8.

¹⁵ Carver, Will You, 11.

¹⁶ Carver, Will You, 13.

¹⁷ Carver, Will You, 11;

¹⁸ Carver, Will You, 14.

19 Carver, Will You, 16.

20 Frederick Barthelme, Moon Deluxe (New York: Penguin, 1984), 13.

21 I am thinking primarily of Madison Bell's article "Less is Less," in the April 1986 issue of Harper's, which I will address in my discussion of Cathedral.

22 Carver, Will You, 19.

23 Bobbie Ann Mason, "Graveyard Day," in The Best American Short Stories 1983, ed. Ann Tyler and Shannon Ravenel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 185.

24 Carver, Will You, 19.

25 Carver, Will You, 19.

26 Carver, Will You, 21.

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31 Carver, Will You, 175.

32 Carver, Will You, 176-177.

33 Carver, Will You, 179-180.

34 Carver, Will You, 180-181.

35 Carver, Will You, 181.

36 Carver, Will You, 181-182.

37 Atlas, 98.

38 Buford, 5.

39 Raymond Carver, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 134.

40 Buford, 5.

41 Carver, What We Talk About, 3.

42 Carver, What We Talk About, 3-4.

43 Judy Troy, "Geometry," The New Yorker, 9 Feb. 1987, p. 34.

44 Carver, What We Talk About, 4.

45 Carver, What We Talk About, 4.

46 Carver, What We Talk About, 5.

47 Carver, What We Talk About, 7.

48 Carver, What We Talk About, 9.

49 Carver, Fires, 204.

50 Carver, What We Talk About, 9-10.

51 Carver, What We Talk About, 105.

52 Carver, What We Talk About, 105.

53 Carver, What We Talk About, 105.

54 Carver, What We Talk About, 106.

55 Carver, What We Talk About, 106-107.

56 Carver, What We Talk About, 109.

57 Carver, What We Talk About, 111-112.

58 Carver, What We Talk About, 66.

59 Carver, What We Talk About, 82.

60 Atlas, 96-97.

61 Atlas, 96.

62 Atlas, 22-23.

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- 77 Atlas, 154.
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- 79 Madison Bell, "Less is Less: The Dwindling American Short Story," Harper's April 1986, 66.
- 80 Bell, 67.
- 81 Raymond Carver, Cathedral (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 127-128.
- 82 Anne Tyler, "Introduction," in Tyler, Ann, and Ravenell, Shannon (Eds.), The Best American Short Stories 1983 (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1983), 14.
- 83 Carver, Cathedral, 128.
- 84 Carver, Cathedral, 130.
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- 88 Carver, Cathedral, 138-139.
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- 96 Carver, Cathedral, 60-61.
- 97 Carver, Cathedral, 65.
- 98 Carver, What We Talk About, 54.
- 99, Howe, 42.
- 100 Carver, Cathedral, 87-88.
- 101 Carver, Cathedral, 88-89.
- 102 Carver, Cathedral, 211.
- 103 Carver, Cathedral, 226-227.
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- 107 Carver, Cathedral, 109.
- 108 Carver, Cathedral, 25.
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- 110 Carver, Cathedral, 26.
- 111 Carver, Fires, 204.
- 112 Sergei M. Eisenstein, The Film Sense (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 103.
- 113 Carver, Fires, 216.

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