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On Carver: Will you please read the silences, please?

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INTRODUCTION

General

Since the publication of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* in 1976, the major trend in scholarship on the short fiction of Raymond Carver has been to examine the silences in his stories – the narrative omissions that operate within and across them, and which have consistently provided interesting critical avenues into his literary *oeuvre*. This study, in line with this trend, also addresses the silences in Carver's stories. While most inquiries into Carver's omissions seem to converge around questions of either their thematic import or narrative strategy, this study investigates the purposes and effects of Carver's omissions in terms of both these categories. Specifically, this study argues that Carver's omissions are an important part of his authorial project to involve the reader in his texts, and that sympathy is a function of the investments that the reader makes in the omissions of his narratives. In response to most critical readings, this study proposes that the social resonance of Carver's fiction is generated as much via his omissions as his themes.

Critiques that focus predominantly on Carver's themes tend to explain the effect of sympathy in terms of Carver's representation of a contemporary working class consciousness paralysed by a myriad of social problems - divorce, unemployment, alcoholism, collective alienation, to name a few. Carver's omissions, as many critics argue, reinforce the plight of his characters: the predicament of individuals caught in a web of emotional, financial and social disempowerment, who have neither the words to articulate their experience nor the recourse to change their circumstances. The recurrence of such themes as alienation, desperation and loss in Carver's fiction would seem to indicate that he has indeed, as Brian Scobie remarks, 'assign[ed] himself the role of one who reports from a neglected social hinterland' (Scobie, 1994:

273). Even though thematic critiques unveil the broader social and cultural concerns reflected in Carver's fiction, they fail to elucidate the methods by which text-reader identification is structured within the interstitial spaces of Carver's language. Furthermore, such critiques are in general too cursory because they fail firstly to elucidate the complexity of Carver's apparently simple style of writing and, secondly, to show adequately how Carver's neo-realism[1] works both within and outside of the realm of realism.

Formal readings of Carver's fiction, on the other hand, tend to sideline the themes of his fiction and engage pre-eminently with debates about whether his aesthetic is, in the final analysis, realist or anti-realist. Inquiries into Carver's omissions at the level of form tend to proceed from one of two opposing premises. The first premise, as apparent in the commentary of such critics as William Stull and Lionel Kelly, is that Carver's omissions are a crucial part of his neo-realist aesthetic to create a direct and transparent equivalence between the word and the world. This equivalence confirms his position within a realist lineage. The second premise is that Carver's omissions destabilize and subvert invisibly the conventions of realism. Critics such as Arthur A. Brown, Marc Chenetier, Anne-Marie Karlsson and Allan Lloyd Smith incline toward the latter view. These critics examine the anti-realist elements that can be discerned in Carver's fiction, and argue that his conspicuous omissions subvert the transparent realism of his fiction, making it, in the end, as much about such meta-fictional concerns as language and the fragmentation of subjectivity, as about the social degeneration of middle and lower class America. Carver's position within a realist lineage is therefore ambivalent.

[1] The term 'neo-realism' is used here simply to locate Carver historically. 'Neo-realism', a literary movement that emerged in America in the 1970s and 1980s, will be discussed in more detail in chapter one of this study.

Marc Chenetier, whose scholarship on Carver proceeds first and foremost from queries about language and form, recognises both the complexity of Carver's fiction and its resistance to classification within the realm of realism. Despite Chenetier's focus on Carver's formal strategies, he is one of few critics who successfully bridges the chasm between formalist and thematic readings of Carver. It may be useful to expand on Chenetier's approach to Carver because he shows convincingly how Carver's omissions, as this study argues, generate social concerns: how the dialectics of the text-reader encounter gives rise to a host of ideological and aesthetic debates. Chenetier's approach therefore has immense pertinence for this study's investigation of reader involvement and the generation of social resonance via narrative omissions. Of Carver's omissions, Chenetier states that:

> Irresolute endings, texts strewn with puzzling gaps, and opening situations progressively destabilized toward a sense of loss and disorientation thus add an aesthetic, moral and ideological impact to a set of formal disruption … Carver favors contact between the struggling nature of the object and the decoding attitudes[2] of the reader at the reception end of the line. The mediating effects of the interrogative structure, of the elements of indeterminacy, and of the undecidable prolongation of the diegetic end transform his narratives into far less and far more than what most reviewers and critics have been tempted to pigeon-hole as "realism" or "minimalism" (Chenetier, 1986: 182).

Chenetier proposes that the interaction that takes place between the reader and the 'object' of representation constitutes the experience of reading Carver's narratives.

[2] Chenetier uses the phrase 'struggling nature of the object' to denote the emotional and psychological anguish of Carver's characters, who are incapable of apprehending the real nature of their problems and who are therefore 'pushed all the deeper into a process of alienation' (Chenetier: 176).

Carver's omissions facilitate this interaction: they disrupt the coherence and systematic determinacy of the narrative events, signalling immediately and progressively the 'loss and disorientation' that typifies the experience of Carver's characters. The reader becomes actively involved in the narrative because he or she is required to make sense of its 'puzzling gaps'. Moreover, the absence of exposition and resolution prolongs the diegetic ends of the narrative, thereby subverting realism's insistence on closed systems of representation. By filling in the series of gaps in the text, the reader begins to apprehend the 'struggling nature of the object' and becomes conscious of his or her own 'decoding attitudes' - the ideological, aesthetic and moral attitudes that he or she is superimposing onto the text. Carver's 'interrogative structure' further precludes his fiction from being classified as realism because the mediating strategies of the narrative are brought into focus. In fact, Chenetier suggests that Carver's use of 'negativity … invalidate[s] the reality his texts manifest' (Chenetier: 182).[3] Chenetier's approach to Carver would seem to be informed by the twin concepts of 'negation' and 'negativity', as formulated by Wolgang Iser in his theorisation of the act of reading. In the *Implied Reader*, Iser proposes that:

> The work is always more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader – though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not

[3] The claim that Carver's omissions 'invalidate the reality his texts manifest' is open to conjecture. While Carver's omissions move his fiction undoubtedly towards postmodernism, it retains, nevertheless, its realist base: seldom is Carver's fiction explicitly about its own genesis, and seldom is real life, the main subject of Carver's fiction, eclipsed by the postmodernist elements at play in his texts. Carver's omissions are, it would seem, responsible for both the postmodernist and realist guises of his fiction, a point that will be developed in subsequent chapters.

> to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader (Iser, 1974: 274).

For Iser, then, the 'realization' of a work is contingent upon the interaction or 'convergence' of the 'patterns of the text' (concrete words, sentences and narrative structures that hold latent meanings), and the reader's unique 'disposition' – his or her philosophical, cultural, aesthetic and political points of reference. In his phenomenological explanation of the collision of normative meanings (the text's and the reader's), and the process whereby the initial disjuncture between these meanings is transfigured into more stable complexes as the reader fills in the 'blanks' within the 'textual repertoire', Iser uses the term 'negation'. He explains the process as follows:

> … negation is aimed at the sensitive spot of the norm, but retains it as a background against which the new meaning of the reassessment may be stabilized. Negation is therefore an active force which stimulates the reader into building up its implicit but unformulated cause as an imaginary object. The blanks arising out of the negation pre-structure the contours of this object and also the reader's attitude to it. … The reader's images fill in this hollow form, thereby establishing his relation to the text, but this relation must be guided to a certain extent, if the reader is to be manoeuvred into a position commensurate to the intentions of the text (Iser, 1976: 213).

Iser's theory of negation provides a viable framework within which to show how Carver involves the reader through narrative 'blanks' - how the reader is 'stimulated' into filling in the blanks in his narratives with 'images' that will enable him or her to realise the 'virtual' dimensions of his texts. Forced to construct the 'implicit but

unformulated cause[s]' of the characters' actions and reactions, readers of Carver's fiction are alerted to the vicissitudes of normative values and are thereby engaged in complex moral debates. Carver's aim to involve the reader is apparent from this assertion in "On Writing":

> If the words are heavy with the writer's own unbridled emotions, or if they are imprecise and inaccurate for some other reason – if the words are in some way blurred – the reader's eyes will slide right over them and nothing will be achieved. The reader's own artistic sense will not be engaged (Carver, 2000: 90).

Carver's precise and accurate grammar of representation is an integral part of his authorial strategy to engage his readers' 'artistic sense' – to invite his readers to pay close and careful attention to the force, meaning and cadences of his words. Lexical precision per se does not explain adequately, though, how the reader is manoeuvred into making emotional and intellectual investments in Carver's omissions. Carver's decision to relate his narratives 'either through the agency of a first person narrator, or by a narrative focalisation almost coincident with the one of the characters' (Scobie: 276), prevents him, it would seem, from mediating the reader's intellectual and emotional responses. How, then, is it possible for the reader to engage with a narrative from which the author's own emotions and viewpoints have been excised - when the author seems to offer the reader few guidelines for interpretation? Moreover, how is it possible for sympathy to be generated when the author's language is ostensibly detached and non-emotive? Anton Chekhov[4], one of the major exponents of twentieth-century realist fiction and the writer whom Carver

[4] 'Errand', a narrative that Carver wrote for Chekhov as an act of 'homage' (Carver, 2000: 198), could be read as an invocation of Chekhov's memory and of the tradition of realism. See Lionel Kelly's "Anton Chekhov and Raymond Carver: A Writer's Strategies of Reading" and Kasia Boddy's "Companion-Souls of the Short Story: Anton Chekhov and Raymond Carver" for discussions of the influence of Chekhov's fiction on Carver's.

declared ‘the greatest short story writer that ever lived’ (Carver, 2000: 219) in his introduction to *The Unknown Chekhov: Stories and Other Writings*, provides a solution. In an informal letter to a friend, Chekhov asserted, ‘When I write, I reckon entirely upon the reader to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story’ (Chekhov, quoted by Lionel Kelly, 1996: 224). The suppression of an authorial voice that manipulates the reader’s responses makes it possible for the reader to add his or her own ‘subjective elements’ to the text and establish, to paraphrase Iser’s words, his or her sympathetic relation to it. Carver thereby activates the ‘artistic sense’ of his readers through his narrative omissions.

Although reader-response theory explains how Carver’s omissions manoeuvre the reader into a position of sympathy, it does not explain how Carver’s transparent and realistic representation of characters and situations also facilitates reader identification. In *Absorption and Theatricality*, Michael Fried discusses the emergence of verisimilitude in eighteenth-century French painting. Although Fried focuses on the visual arts in this book, he provides a model of aesthetic response that can be appropriated as a heuristic device for an investigation into the arousal of sympathy in Carver’s narratives. Fried posits the notion of aesthetic ‘absorption’ to describe paintings in which subjects are depicted as beings completely absorbed in whatever they are thinking, feeling or doing. Citing Jean Baptiste Greuze’s *Pére De Famille* as an example of absorptive technique, Fried observes that:

> The mastery of expression which the critics of the time found in the *Pére de Famille* may be seen to have consisted in the ‘realistic’ depiction of individual psychology and emotional responses to the biblical text … but also … in the persuasiveness with which the responses made themselves felt as those of persons *wholly absorbed* in the reading itself and the thoughts and feelings it engendered (Fried, 1980: 102).

In order to achieve a compelling verisimilitude between the emotional and psychological responses of the subjects of their paintings, and those of people in the external world, artists such as Greuze depicted their subjects as beings '*wholly* absorbed' in the acts that they were performing. The persuasive realism of the *Pére de Famille* inheres in the representation of subjects who seem, as Fried writes, to 'declare their aloneness relative to the beholder or at any rate their obliviousness to their presence' (Fried: 105). The absorption of the subjects in their own private thoughts and feelings causes beholders to suspend disbelief in the artifice of the painting and to become absorbed into the scene represented – to imagine the thoughts and feelings that preoccupy the subjects of the artwork.

Absorption explains the verisimilitude of Carver's narratives: the depiction of characters as beings '*wholly* absorbed' in whatever they are thinking, feeling or doing. Carver, in omitting to comment on either his characters or their actions, creates the impression of individuals completely engaged in the 'business of living' (Carver, 2000: 221), characters who, to adapt Fried's words, are impervious to the presence of the reader. Inasmuch as 'absorption' describes the transparent correspondence between the world of the narrative and the external world, it begs the following question: how can the reader identify with a scene, especially a written scene, from which he or she has seemingly been excluded and positioned as a passive receiver? This study argues that the characters' own self-absorption has the corollary effect of absorbing the reader into the action of the narratives. Carver's omissions further facilitate the reader's absorption into the text because the reader is required to make intellectual, imaginative and emotional investments in order to realise the latent meanings of his narratives. These investments, this study argues, align the reader sympathetically with the characters and their circumstances.

An inquiry into the arousal of sympathy that utilizes the notion of absorption and that is conducted within the parameters of reader-response theory runs the risk of making generalised statements about the reader's responses to a text and being too subjectivist in its critique of the narratives selected for discussion. It would, in other words, be dangerous and naïve to assume that all readers of Carver's fiction would, firstly, be absorbed into his narratives and, secondly, feel sympathy for the characters of his stories. For this reason, the term 'sympathy' in the context of this study denotes and includes all forms of text-reader identification, not only responses that match the broad conception of sympathy as an attitude of pity or compassion.

This study would benefit from a brief overview of the project of sympathy in European and American literature in order to expand on the definition of sympathy, crystallise its overall purposes and effects, and provide the necessary context for a discussion of sympathy in Carver.

The Project of Sympathy in Fiction: The Bonds that Transcend Difference

In *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy*, David Marshall defines sympathy as a 'correspondence of feeling' (Marshall, 1988: 28) between separate subjectivities and as the 'capacity to feel the sentiments of someone else' (Marshall: 29). Confining his discussion of sympathy to a few of the most famous novels of eighteenth-century Europe, Marshall observes that such writers as Marivaux, Rousseau and Mary Shelley used sympathy as an instrument of social reform in their fiction. These writers reflected the bonds that have the potential to unite disparate individuals and social collectives in recognition of a common humanity, and deployed sympathy as a narrative device that would enable 'the distance and difference between people to be transcended, allowing an exchange between parts, characters and persons [to take place]' (Marshall: 5). In exacting an imaginative copy of a character's thoughts and

feelings, the reader occupies a space in which he or she mirrors the thoughts and feelings of a character in an act of complicity and understanding. Sympathetic alliance involves, however, far more than a simple reproduction of thoughts and feelings, as Marshall shows. The term 'sympathy' is used by Marshall in context of the 'network of associations' in eighteenth-century France and England that linked such words as "sensation", "sentiment", "sentimental", "sensibilité" and "sensible" (Marshall: 26). By drawing attention to the semantic and phonetic links between these words, Marshall alludes to the ideological foundations of sympathy and shows that the term 'sympathy' has connotations that extend beyond the general understanding of the word as an attitude of 'fellow feeling' or pity. A part of an interconnected and dynamic system of social discourse, the term 'sympathy' encompasses a range of political, social and ethical attitudes that align separate subjectivities in a spirit of communion as differences are transcended and are even erased.

Kristin Boudreau[5] takes a similar view of sympathy in her examination of the political, social and philosophical sentiments that came to inform models of sympathetic union in American literature from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Boudreau recognises in the religious thought and idiom of the 'New World' literature of the middle and late seventeenth century the most 'influential instrument' of the project of sympathy: the metaphor of consanguinity. The metaphor of 'shared blood' has been invoked, Boudreau observes, time and again in American literature in order to 'unite atomistic individuals' (Boudreau, 2002: 17) and to cultivate a sense of national identity in a country that, since its Pilgrim beginnings, has seen a veritable explosion in religious and cultural diversity.

[5] I am heavily indebted to Kristin Boudreau's book *Sympathy in American Literature: American Sentiments from Jefferson to the Jameses* for this historical overview of sympathy. It should be noted that I have summarised only the sections of Boudreau's investigation that I perceive to be the most relevant to this study, and that my own discussion of sympathy therefore reflects in no way the whole of Boudreau's work on sympathy.

In line with an emergent Liberalism a century later, the new republic rejected the utilitarian logic of sympathy espoused by the church in the first Puritan communities of New England, and embraced the models of sympathy articulated in the traditions of moral philosophy in Europe and the United States. At this time in American history, the work of Adam Smith and David Hume had come to exert considerable influence on political and social ideas of good governance. Both Smith's and Hume's accounts of sympathy recognise, like Marshall's, its social purpose: sentiments that have the potential to unite separate subjectivities, and which therefore facilitate the redressing of problems of social division and alienation. For Smith, sympathy originates in the imagination:

> [Our senses] never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are [another's] sensations. … By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations (Smith, quoted by Boudreau: 6).

Sympathy, then, according to Smith, is the ability to identify imaginatively with others. In crossing spaces of difference, the individual becomes metaphorically one with a 'cognitively separate being' (Boudreau: 6) and is hence able to form an accurate conception of another's sensations and sentiments. While Smith argues that sympathy is contingent upon the existence of basic differences between individuals in the bands of 'experience, appearance and perception' (Boudreau: 12), Hume argues that it is likely to be greater when there is, paradoxically, a greater index of similarity between separate subjectivities:

> This resemblance must very much contribute to make us enter into the sentiments of others, and embrace them with facility and pleasure. Accordingly we find, that where, beside the general resemblance of our natures, there is any peculiar similarity in our manners, or character, or country, or language, it facilitates the sympathy. The stronger the relation is betwixt ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition, and convey to the related idea the vivacity of conception, with which we always form the idea of our own person (Hume, quoted by Boudreau: 11).

Both Hume and Smith, like Marshall, figure sympathy as an exchange whereby the subject sees, by placing himself or herself in another's situation, the spectacle of his or her own imagined suffering. In recognising in the object of sympathy resemblances with our own lives, we begin to 'form the idea of our own person', seeing in the other a reflection of ourselves. Sympathy, then, destabilizes the self-other dyad as the subject assimilates into his or her psyche new and expanded definitions of self.

Carver and the Project of Sympathy: The Universal American

Sympathy, as both Marshall and Boudreau make clear, has most commonly been used in fiction in order to achieve certain social, political and moral ends. Boudreau argues that these models of sympathy inaugurated American literature's persistent concern for the historical relationship between the state and the individual. It has indeed been the preserve of such diverse authors as Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Steinbeck and Henry James to reflect in their fiction the experience of the citizen and to engage with principles of social equality and political justice. Fiction that deploys

sympathy as a narrative device in the interests of achieving such ends routinely makes the connection between the narrative world and the social order that is the object of critique explicit. This is true of Hawthorne's indictment of religious dogma and pious hypocrisy in Puritan Boston in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), or Steinbeck's examination of the failure of the 'American Dream' and the exploitation of migrant labourers during the Great Depression in *Of Mice and Men* (1937), or James's examination of the challenges faced by immigrants to America in *The American Scene* (1907).

Yet, such a connection is seldom ever explicit in Carver as he suppresses the specific historical context of his fiction in favour of an almost universal representation of social paralysis. Carver has, furthermore, often either evaded or eschewed questions about the political and social resonance of his stories. In an interview with John Alton[6] in 1986, two years before his death from lung cancer at the age of fifty, Carver states:

> I've been accused and praised for taking, or not taking, a social stand in my work. It's been said that I portray people struggling in a society that is oppressing them, and so this society – the society we're living in – is corrupt, it's bad, the system has failed us, and so on. And on the other hand, I've been accused of making "political" statements that are harming the republic in some way by not putting a happy face on things, by presenting an image that isn't going to redound to our credit, which isn't going to be in our best interests abroad. However, some other critics have praised what they regard as my "political" awareness and the "stance" I'm taking. But really all I'm trying to do is write stories, and for

[6] Alton, J. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Literature: An Interview With Raymond Carver". *Chicago Review*, 36: 2, Autumn 1988: pp. 4-21.

> the most part write stories about what I know about (Carver, in Alton, 1988: 11).

Despite Carver's insistence that his 'stories take place on a personal level as opposed to a larger social or political arena' (Carver, quoted by Sobie: 274), he concedes, albeit laconically, that his representation of working class America could be construed as an 'indictment' of 'the dark side of Reagan's America' (Carver, quoted by Sobie: 274). Inasmuch as it would be misleading, if not spurious, to discuss the project of sympathy in Carver as an overtly political and social strategy, it would be worth taking up some of the political and social issues that critics have perceived in - and have possibly projected onto - his stories. These issues may indeed show how sympathy is generated via such themes as alienation, desperation and loss.

Paul Skenazy argues that despite the fact that Carver's 'domestic melodramas are arranged to imply only themselves' (Skenazy, 1988: 78), it is impossible to ignore the broader social, political and cultural concerns that can be perceived in his fiction. Skenazy sees in Carver's presentation of 'individual states of mind and soul – failure, defeat, incommunicable hurt, and shock that so much hope has dwindled to so little significance' (Skenazy: 78) an America where people live out their lives in a permanent state of 'limbo'. In this state of limbo, 'lives are in suspended animation, verging on disarray' (Boxer and Phillips, 1979: 76) as people exist between partners, between jobs, between homes, and between drinks (Skenazy: 83). Carver represents a substratum of American society where individuals are incapacitated by the flux of their lives.

That critics have emphasised Carver's apparent preoccupation with the degeneration of American culture and the fragmentation of American identity can be explained by

the social 'dis-ease'[7] that seems to typify the existence of many of Carver's characters. Graham Clarke writes compellingly about how Carver's lexical economy reinforces his implicit social and political commentary. Contending that Carver's syntax is 'as much concerned with the silent as it is with the spoken' (Clarke, 1990: 105), Clarke focuses his discussion of silence, of the glimpse, in terms of Carver's representation of a working class identity 'caught within a culture of collages' (Clarke: 105). Reading the silences of Carver's syntax as symptomatic of a national crisis of identity, Clarke argues that Carver's narratives, which are ultimately about distance and displacement, speak to an 'America devoid of its unifying myths' (Clarke: 106), an America where referents of meaning have been 'displaced by a scattered and fragmented plurality' (Clarke: 105). Sympathy as a force that unites 'atomistic individuals' has dissolved as the economic and social divisions between disparate collectives have become more pronounced. Difference is neither celebrated nor erased, but is exploited in the interests of capital gain. America itself has been reduced to a national corporation that sells images of 'imagined lives and the myths of an idealized American materialism' (Clarke: 105) to a populace that, even as it understands that its 'histories are displaced from the fictions of the culture in which [it] exist[s]' (Clarke: 105), is incapable of inventing future histories by which it might reclaim and restore a sense of national identity.

In a similar discussion of Carver's representation of social degeneration and the fragmentation of national identity, Allan Lloyd Smith asks if Carver's characters resemble Hemingway's 'damaged heroes' (Smith, 1987: 50). Smith attributes the

[7] In "Bluebird Mornings, Storm Warnings", Carver's review of William Kittredge's *We Are Not In This Together*, Carver cites Albert Camus's phrase 'dis-ease' to describe 'a certain terrible kind of domesticity (Carver, 2000: 250) prevalent in Kittredge's narratives. The phrase 'dis-ease' applies equally well to Carver's representation of domestic dissolution – his presentation of, as Leonard Michaels, notes 'a terrifying vision of ordinary human life' (Michaels, quoted by Alton: 14). This 'terrifying vision' converges around Carver's representation of individuals who are in conflict with each other, and, on a wider level, with the formalized codes of thought and behaviour determined by society at large.

ennui and inertia that defines the experience of Carver's characters to the 'atrophy of their culture: ... the brain damage caused by T.V.[8], bowling alleys and trailer parks, the lack of money and the lack of words to cope with their experience' (Smith, 52). Is Carver's political and social critique of America to be found in his representation of an otherwise invisible class of people who have been financially, emotionally and even intellectually immobilised by the effects of capitalism and the 'atrophy of their culture'? If Carver's stance is indeed directed against these and other issues, then sympathy certainly functions as a political device that alerts readers to the social problems of a lost American class.

Carver states in 'Fiction of Occurrence and Consequence' that fiction should have the capacity for 'enlarging our view of ourselves and the world' (Carver, 2000: 220) and should 'bear witness' (Carver, 2000: 220) to our lives. Although Carver does not foreground the political and social purposes of sympathy to the same extent as John Winthrop, the church leader whose 1630 speech 'A Model of Christian Charity' inaugurated the metaphor of consanguinity, or Hume and Smith, his use of sympathy also has an ethical purpose. Carver shows the need for sympathy in a secular world where social bonds have become even more necessary in the face of a fracturing plurality and a crippling complacency. In his interview with Alton, Carver, in response to the interviewer's remark of their being in his fiction 'tremendous sympathy' on the author's part for his characters, states:

> I hope so. I feel that there is, at any rate. In all the books so far, I could never have been condescending to those characters and felt myself any sort of writer at all. I have to care for the people in the stories. These are my people. I can't offend them and I wouldn't (Carver in Alton: 9).

[8] Clarke identifies the television as the medium through which images of America's myths are transmitted. For the characters of Carver's fiction, there is 'no reality beyond the screen [as the] T.V. exists as a form of symbiotic icon devoid of any moral referent' (Clarke: 115).

Carver himself performs acts of sympathetic exchange in the writing of his narratives: he reserves judgement of his characters and refuses to 'condescend' to their experience from a position of moral sanctimony. The influence of Carver's own experience of the exigencies of financial hardship on his narratives is apparent from his sympathetic representation of individuals finding it impossible to cope with the pressures of such domestic responsibilities and commitments as marriage, children, mortgages and bills. This influence can be ascertained from his autobiographical essay "Fires". Neither a full account of Carver's life, nor a comprehensive précis of his career as a writer, "Fires" is nevertheless an important essay because it sheds light on some of the most distinctive issues and themes in Carver's work, particularly his understanding of the erosion of hope in the face of unexpected adversity. Speaking of one of the lowest points in his life, when he and his wife began to see their 'dreams [go] bust' (Carver, 2000: 99), Carver reflects that:

> The time came and went when everything my wife and I had 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 (Carver, 2000: 100).

These words go some way toward describing the experience of Carver's characters, characters who, for one reason or another, have seen, or are in the very midst of seeing, their lives disintegrate, and who can neither comprehend nor articulate what has happened.

Although Carver's 'low rent tragedies' are 'replete with recognizable people' (Carver, 2000: 221), his characters, on the brink of emotional and spiritual collapse and

treading a precarious line between sanity and insanity, often engage in self-destructive and anti-social behaviour. Carver's implicit exhortation to his readers is to see beyond the faults of his characters and to recognise the shared experience of all human beings - the dilemmas of conscience that torment individuals as they struggle to make sense of the world and survive within it. The purpose of sympathy in Carver is to remind readers of their ethical obligation to engage with the experience of others. In sympathising with the characters of Carver's stories, readers are given a devastating glimpse of their own fallibility and therefore of their own humanity.

Chapter Outline

The stories that comprise this study have been selected from across four volumes of Carver's short fiction[9]. "They're Not Your Husband", "Neighbors", and "The Bath" are from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976). "Furious Seasons" is from *Furious Seasons* (1977) [10]. "Why Don't You Dance?" is from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) and "Where I'm Calling From", "Careful" and "A Small, Good Thing" are from *Cathedral* (1983). These stories reflect the development of Carver's career and are representative of the main stylistic elements and overarching themes that define his pre- and post- *Cathedral* fiction. They have been chosen, furthermore, for their capacity to demonstrate how sympathy operates across his fiction. Chapter one, a formal analysis of Carver's narrative devices, shows how sympathy is structured in the omissions of language and therefore argues that it is largely a function of the reader's investments. Chapter two, on the other hand, offers a thematic analysis of Carver's narratives and shows how sympathy is structured as an

[9] Most of these stories have been taken from *Where I'm Calling From: The Selected Stories* (1988), a collection compiled by Carver himself shortly before his death in the same year.
[10] It should be noted that although "Furious Seasons" was published after the narratives in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, it is actually one of Carver's earliest narratives.

exchange between the characters themselves. Such exchanges of sympathy will be discussed in relation to the humanist trajectory of Carver's later fiction.

Chapter one comprises critical analyses of "They're Not Your Husband", "Neighbors", "Furious Seasons" and "Why Don't You Dance?" and focuses on the salient features, techniques and concerns that define Carver's pre-*Cathedral* fiction. An overview of neo-realism introduces this chapter and establishes how Carver's omissions subvert invisibly, to recall Chenetier's point, 'the reality his texts manifest'. By drawing on the themes of alienation, loss and stasis, and by highlighting the negative impact of these conditions on the personal relationships of the characters, I intend to show how Carver's representation of middle and lower class America coalesces around scenes of domestic disintegration (divorce, financial problems, disaffection and boredom). Chapter one will be framed by principles of reader response theory (i.e. Wolfgang Iser's notions of 'negation', 'negativity' and narrative 'blanks') and Fried's notion of absorption, which will be discussed in relation to the transparent mode of Carver's fiction.

Chapter two comprises comparative analyses of "The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing", and "Careful" and "Where I'm Calling From". "The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing" will be approached comparatively for the simple reason that the latter is the revised (and considerably longer) version of "The Bath". "Careful" and "Where I'm Calling From" will be compared because even though they both deal explicitly with alcoholism, they project very different views of the world.

An overview of Carver's so-called 'minimalism' introduces this chapter and provides a basis from which to examine the 'anti-minimalist' tendencies in Carver's later fiction. This chapter also examines the paradigmatic shift from what William Stull calls 'existential realism' to 'humanist realism' in Carver's fiction, a shift which Carver

attributes, somewhat wryly, to the fact that he had, just prior to writing *Cathedral*, recovered from his own arduous battle with alcoholism. Stull characterises 'existential realism' as fiction in which the absence of the author can be read as the absence of God, God being, Stull writes, 'the archetypal author' (Stull, 1985: 7-8). 'Humanist realism', on the other hand, describes Carver's later interest in a 'more expressive, more "painterly" approach to [his] subjects' (Stull: 7-8). The basic difference is that 'existential realism' treats reality objectively, while 'humanist realism' treats reality subjectively. The shift from 'existential realism' to 'humanist realism' provides a viable critical angle from which to investigate how, if at all, Carver's delineation of hope and optimism in his later work as opposed to despair and failure in his early work has an impact on the question of sympathy.

The conclusion of this study offers a response to a leading question in scholarship on Carver: Is Carver's fiction to be positioned within the ambit of realism or does it move beyond realism towards postmodernism? It asks how Carver both utilizes and subverts the conventions of realism and, if so, what impact this has on critical heurism. Such findings would obviously have implications for how we should classify Carver's fiction, and, more significantly, how we might read it.

In summary, this study investigates how sympathy is structured across Carver's narratives and how his omissions destabilize and subvert invisibly the conventions of realism.

CHAPTER ONE: CARVER'S DESPERATE AMERICA

Carver's Neo-Realist Aesthetic and Lexical Restraint

Carver's fiction has been designated historically within a literary tradition of neo-realism. Neo-realism emerged in America in the 1980s, but, as Anne Marie Karlsson points out, probably began a decade before Bill Buford acclaimed this 'peculiar and haunting' (Buford, quoted by Karlsson, 1990: 144) style of fiction in an article, provocatively titled "Dirty Realism: New Writing From America", for *Granta* magazine in 1983 (Karlsson: 144). Buford's article precipitated the explosion of arresting epithets[11] to describe the fiction of such writers as Richard Ford, Jayne Anne Phillips, Frederick Barthelme, Tobias Wolff, Ellen Gilchrist and Bobby Ann Mason. Buford's epithet 'Dirty Realism' has, no doubt, despite dissention from a few critics, Allan Lloyd Smith[12] in particular, remained the most apt and probably best known of the myriad labels that neo-realism has occasioned. 'Dirty Realism' alludes to the frequent invocation by these and other authors of the cultural masonry that has come to be

[11] Carver's fiction has been variously labelled. It has been known most commonly as 'minimalism' in America and as 'Dirty Realism' in Britain. However, among the more 'imaginative' labels, as Ann-Marie Karlsson writes, are 'K-Mart Realism', 'Hick Chic' and 'Post Vietnam, post-literary, post-modernist blue-collar neo-early Hemingwayism' (Karlsson: 144). Karlsson herself suggests that the label 'Hyperrealism' should be used to designate Carver's fiction for it describes several features of his work. Such features include the focus on the minutia of human behaviour and interaction, a feature that acts in Carver as a literary equivalent of the filmic close up – a technique that magnifies (and may even distort) the object of representation - the emphasis on stillness and silence as opposed to action and communication; and the work's ability to act as a literary counterpart to hyperrealist art, an art form in which the iconography of American mass culture is the subject of representation.

[12] Smith rejects the epithet 'Dirty Realism', arguing that it perpetuates the false impression that writers of neo-realism are interested only in writing about the 'sordid aspects of life' (Karlsson: 144). Smith contends that the epithet is misleading and suggests that much fiction within the school of neo-realism 'focuses itself through the problematic expression of vernacular voices, and the silences that surround them' (Smith: 48). The 'expression of vernacular voices' lies in the representation of what Smith identifies as the 'redneck experience: of hunting, shooting and fishing, unemployment, divorce and inarticulacy' (Smith: 48). Similarly, Karlsson contends that Carver's omissions 'tell us more about the absence that permeates (the characters') lives than any spoken word could ever communicate' (Karlsson: 145). If Carver's characters fail to articulate the despondency to which they have succumbed, other critics have made up for this reticence, articulating their own concerns that Carver condescends to his characters and thereby reduces them to nothing more than 'actors in a Carver story' (Malamet, 1991: 59).

associated almost invariably with middle and lower class America – drugstores, supermarkets, gas stations, factories, trailer parks, motels, diners, bars, Cable T.V., suburbia – the melange of Americana that is so often reflected in cinema and on television. 'Dirty Realism' denotes, furthermore, the concern of these writers to represent a de-romanticised and de-mythologized America, an America denuded of its illusions of social egalitarianism and economic opportunity. With this concern in mind, writers of 'Dirty Realism' represented the social and economic realities of ordinary citizens within the locus of mainstream society and at the margins of this society - aspects of everyday life deemed by purveyors of literary value neither 'literary' nor 'noble' enough to be the subject of serious literature. By transforming the themes of daytime television[13] into art, writers of 'Dirty Realism' managed collectively to pen an incisive critique of the American social establishment: the inadequacy and redundancy to an experience of modern America of the myths and illusions that for centuries have permeated almost every aspect of civil life.

The representation of the realities of post-Vietnam middle and lower class America brought about a shift in emphasis from narrative action to narrative technique. This shift precipitated the emergence of a contemporary realism concerned less with what Frederick Barthelme[14] denigrated as traditional realism's use of 'lies [and] falsifications of experience for the sake of drama' (Barthelme, quoted by Karlsson: 145), than with the refinement of narrative techniques by which to represent in precise and transparent a way as possible the experience of ordinary people. Carver states in "On Writing" that:

[13] Ewing Campbell asserts that Carver exploits the 'techniques, situations and effects of popular forms' (Campbell: 9) in his fiction. The themes of daytime television are, in other words, the vehicles through which Carver writes middle and lower class America. He imbues these themes with an unparalleled 'iconographic intensity' (Campbell: 16) and thereby creates a mirror in which America sees its own social fragmentation.

[14] Barthelme opted for a mode of 'representational writing', which, like neo-realism, declares its own fictiveness by being, as Karlsson observes, 'conspicuously real' (Karlsson: 145).

> It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power. It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader's spine – the source of artistic delight, as Nabokov would have it (Carver, 2000: 89).

Neo-realism's transparency operates, however, in an altogether different manner from traditional realism: it implicitly announces its own artifice, the 'lies' and 'falsifications' that it uses in order to create the impression of a transparent correspondence with the real world. In creating a transparent prose, this fiction directs the reader's attention to its constructed nature, to its very use of language and technique to render a highly contrived illusion of an invisible connection between the word and the world. In other words, technique is used to make the narrative world seem realistic, yet in making the narrative world seem so realistic, neo-realism declares its fictional nature and betrays its own literary techniques. Neo-realism's betrayal of its own literary techniques would seem, paradoxically, to subvert the transparency it aims to create. Although neo-realism's omissions draw attention to its artistic creation, they are also, in the same instance, responsible for its mimetic effects: they service the neo-realist's representation of the fragmentary experiences that constitute real life, experiences which often elude our total understanding whilst they are happening. These omissions produce, as Karlsson contends, the overriding quality of absence in neo-realist fiction - a 'sense of absence in characters, events and setting' (Karlsson: 145). The silences that surround the characters and their lives orient the reader to the idea that what he or she bears witness to is only ever a part of the full history or story of the characters' lives. Like the strangers whom one might observe in public, Carver's characters are never completely knowable because their

histories can only to be guessed at and reconstructed imaginatively. Despite this 'sense of absence', which is especially acute in Carver, and which increases as his narratives progress, the 'effects of language, situation, and insight' (Carver, 2000: 220) in neo-realist texts are 'intense and total' (Carver, 2000: 220) [15] because all extraneous and superfluous detail has been ruthlessly excised. That absence is a part of Carver's authorial enterprise can be ascertained from what he says in "On Writing" about the short story itself. Citing V.S. Pritchett's definition of a short story as 'something glimpsed from the corner of the eye, in passing' (Carver, 2000: 92), Carver later states that it is the writer's 'task to invest the glimpse with all that he can' (Carver, 2000: 92). Carver's inclinations as a poet possibly explain the economy of his short stories: his aim to distil only the essence of meaning and to invest his narratives with a multiplicity of potential meanings. While certain writers and poets rely on rhetoric for the interplay of meanings, Carver relies on narrative omissions. Just as rhetorical language refuses to fix meaning by producing a play of signs, so Carver's omissions refuse to fix meaning by leaving open the windows to interpretation.

Interpretation remains open because nothing in Carver is ever certain – critical events are often only implied as opposed to stated unequivocally. Carver therefore denies his readers the assurance of knowing whether their intuitions about the characters and their situations are correct or incorrect. This ambiguity produces the persistent, beneath-the-surface 'sense of menace' that pervades many, if not all, of his stories. Commenting on this feature in "On Writing", Carver says:

[15] The experience of reading Carver can, in fact, be likened to watching only the middle part of a film, the mind having to work overtime to fill in the beginning and make sense of the characters' contexts and relationships, the ending to be ascertained only from the threads of the action.

> I like it when there is some feeling of threat or sense of menace in short stories. I think a little menace is fine to have in a story. For one thing, it's good for the circulation. … There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent, that things are in relentless motion, or else, most often, there simply won't be a story. What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things (Carver, 2000: 90).

This 'sense of menace' is generated by his omissions - the tension between the visible action of the story and the landscape that lies beneath this visible action. Carver concentrates on the interaction of surface and sub-surface forces in 'relentless motion', an interaction that is designed to intrude upon and disrupt the 'smooth surface of things'. The 'action' of Carver's narratives, then, lies more in the omissions than in the 'concrete words' – in the silences that make up the submerged text. Carver conveys with great restraint the complex and repressed emotions that overpower his characters. Seldom do his characters ever articulate their emotions, with the possible inference that they themselves do not understand what they are feeling. These emotions exist, however, in the submerged landscapes of Carver's fiction. This emotionally violent subtext makes even the most mundane events seem menacing. Smith, commenting on this aspect, contends that there inheres in Carver's characters a 'lucid madness, enabling us to glimpse the parameters of an experience that appears so ordinary, so everyday, that it creates a kind of awe, and which, when we stop to think about it is not ordinary at all' (Smith: 50). Although Carver embraces the ordinary and the commonplace, he manages to convey the manic desperation of a broad canvas of marginalized individuals, who, at the mercy of inexorable forces,

are unable to extricate themselves from the circumstances in which they find themselves.

The menace that pervades Carver's fiction is further caused by the emphasis that he places on the present circumstances of his characters. This emphasis enables him to focus intensely on the repercussions of his characters' actions and decisions and to reinforce the impression that his characters are locked into the present [16]. This feature could be said to erase the histories and futures of the characters, making their lives and the narrative action seem incomplete and de-contextualized. I would argue against such a view, however, because the implied histories and futures of the characters are present in the condition of stasis and loss to which they have surrendered. Indeed, as various as the 'subjects' and 'voices' are in Carver's fiction, (Nesset, 1991: 292), he projects, nonetheless, a 'common plight rather than a common subject' (Nesset: 292). The plight of a social collective immobilized by their material and social regression is magnified by the ordinariness of the situations that Carver presents, and is found in the patterns of despair and hope, regrettable pasts and curtailed futures, marriage and divorce, and employment and unemployment that operate across his fiction. Ewing Campbell argues that once a general pattern of composition has been discerned across Carver's fiction, the omissions in his stories yield valuable insights:

> … the patterns of Carver's fiction – repetition, parallelism, opposition, shared elements – have the power to reveal missing scenes, relations, explanations, the past, the predictable future. The lesson of these truncated narratives is that much of their merit can be found in the

[16] This pertains specifically to Carver's pre-*Cathedral* fiction, where characters fail to see beyond their present despair.

> omitted parts, which patience and care can flesh out (Campbell, 1991: 13).

Campbell's point is valid: a far more rewarding understanding of Carver's *oeuvre* is to be gained from reading across his fiction, as opposed to reading one or two of his stories in isolation. By looking at the collective experience of Carver's characters, the reader is able to access their elided histories and futures. The epigram to *Where I'm Calling From*, an extract from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera, describes the imperfect lives of Carver's characters, who are caught in limbo somewhere between their painful histories and uncertain futures:

> We can never know what to want,
> because, living only one life, we can neither
> compare it with our previous lives
> nor perfect it in our lives to come.

Implicit in these lines is an understanding of the transience of life and the ardent quest of all human beings to discover what they want and need. Despite accusations that Carver's representation of human nature is, at times, nihilistically pessimistic, he, nevertheless, demonstrates through his fiction a deep sympathy for the propensity of all human beings to err as they try to 'wrest salvation from adversity' (Alton: 21).

Chapter Overview

The aim of this chapter is to show how sympathy is generated via Carver's narrative omissions and to provide concrete examples of his neo-realist aesthetic. The notions of 'negation' and 'absorption' will be discussed in relation to the principal issues that each narrative projects. "They're Not Your Husband" presents the reader with a

glimpse of a marriage in crisis and paints a disquieting portrait of self-alienation and obsession, an individual in the grip of powerful and destructive emotions who, once he sets out on a collision course of blind obsession, fails pitifully to see the foolishness of his own behaviour. As the reader fills in the blanks that surround Earl Ober's manic desperation, he or she sympathetically aligns himself or herself with a character whose actions are dangerously misguided. "Neighbors", a narrative that exemplifies Carver's neo-realist allegiances, also focuses on the dynamics of a relationship in crisis and is representative of the theme of voyeurism that operates across his fiction. The absence of a mediating voice that intervenes between the reader and the text creates the impression that the characters are, to recall Fried's words, 'oblivious to the presence of the beholder' - '*wholly* absorbed' in the act of violating their neighbours' privacy. The reader is thereby positioned as a voyeur and is manoeuvred into identifying with the characters. "Furious Seasons" focuses on the psychological turmoil of an individual haunted by the recollection of a single, cataclysmic moment in his life. Interestingly, of all Carver's stories, "Furious Seasons" is perhaps the most 'experimental' because it reads as an example of modernist fiction rather than realist fiction. The modernist tendencies of this narrative inhere in its non-linear structure and in Carver's use of stream-of-consciousness, a technique that absorbs the reader directly into the psychological anguish of the protagonist. In addition, Carver's omissions in "Furious Seasons" are probably at their most opaque - and fraught. The exact nature of Farrell's and his sister, Iris's, relationship remains a disturbing cipher in the text and is one of many question marks in a narrative that uses omission to underscore the silence that surrounds what one suspects, with a feeling of unease, is an incestuous relationship. "Why Don't You Dance?", a narrative that juxtaposes the end of one relationship and the beginning of another, is an excellent example of Carver's ability to transform the commonplace and the ordinary into events that are actually quite extraordinary, and which point to emotions and histories far more complex than they at first seem. "Why

Don't You Dance?" is also a superlative example of the 'surreal' light in which the events of Carver's narratives are often cast, the events being, in the same instance, curiously ordinary and extraordinarily curious.

"They're Not Your Husband"

In an interview for the *Paris Review* in 1983, Carver makes a telling remark about his appropriation of the otherwise mundane and ordinary as subject matter for his fiction:

> Years ago I read something in a letter by Chekhov that impressed me. It was a piece of advice to one of his many correspondents, and it went something like this: Friend, you don't have to write about extraordinary people who accomplish extraordinary and memorable deeds. (Understand I was in college at the time and reading plays about princes and dukes and the overthrow of kingdoms. Quests and the like, large undertakings to establish heroes in their rightful places. Novels with larger than life heroes). But reading what Chekhov had to say in that letter, and in other letters of his as well, and reading his stories, made me see things differently than I had before (Carver, 2000: 3).

Rather than write about people who achieve 'extraordinary and memorable deeds', Carver writes about the 'Joe Blows' whose lives have reached a critical impasse and who, because they can move neither forward nor backward, are continually reminded of their failure, or of 'some lost, almost forgotten, not-really-expected possibility' (Skenazy: 79). The despondence that attends Earl Ober's realization of his own failure lies hidden beneath the domestic inanities represented in "They're Not Your Husband". The commonplace events of Earl and Doreen Obers' small-time lives provide the backdrop for a narrative that is essentially about Earl's private anxieties

and self-alienating behaviour. In the absence of authorial interpretation, the reader is forced to examine the extrinsic actions of the characters in order to find the meanings or 'morals' of the text.

The narrative's opening words immediately sound Earl Ober's marginal status, and indicate that his descent into a state of manic desperation 'between jobs as a salesman' (Carver, 1995: 34) will be charted. The narrative's temporal location – events occur during an intervening period of financial uncertainty in the protagonist's life – reinforces the idea that the protagonist is in a kind of psychic limbo. Dependent upon his wife's modest salary (he counts her tips every evening, lining the coins up in rows), Earl's anxieties about money, the reader infers, fuel his destructive behaviour.

The narrative action is set in motion when Earl overhears two men wearing 'business suits' making derogatory remarks about his wife while she goes about her work as a waitress in a twenty-four hour coffee shop on the outskirts of town: 'Look at the ass on that. I don't believe it'; 'Some jokers like their quim fat' (34). That the men are wearing 'business suits' is a significant detail that orients the reader to the submerged force that drives the narrative forward: Earl's subconscious fear that he is a failure and that this makes him a target of social derision. The men's 'business suits' remind Earl of his own lack of financial and vocational success. Instead of providing a detailed picture of the Obers' marital history, Carver focuses on a single event in their marriage - Earl's overhearing of offensive remarks made about his wife directly, and about him indirectly - that precipitates the erosion of such fundamental interpersonal values as respect, honesty and trust. Carver thereby thrusts his readers directly into a crisis event in the Obers' marriage, forcing the reader to invest this glimpse of a dissolving marriage with his or her own insights and 'subjective elements'.

That the Obers' marriage is thrown into crisis is apparent from Earl's reactions to the men's comments about his wife. Earl begins to assimilate negative views of his wife, based on the crass opinions and judgements of strangers. In assimilating these views of his wife, Earl redefines - in fact negates - their relationship and creates distance between himself and his wife. As Earl watches his wife prepare an ice-cream sundae at the counter, he begins to see her body from the perspective of the two men. He notices, to his embarrassed horror, her white skirt 'yanked against her hips' and, inch-by-inch, 'crawl up' her legs to show 'girdle, and it was pink, thighs that were rumpled and gray, and a little hairy, and veins that spread in a berserk display' (35). Driven to 'breaking point' by the sight of Doreen shaking a can of whipped cream as the two men exchange 'knowing' glances, Earl leaves the coffee shop in a storm of emotion, refusing to acknowledge Doreen calling out his name and thereby betray, in front of the two men, his connection to her - the fact that she is his wife. By ignoring his wife, Earl aligns himself with the businessmen, selling out his wife, his marriage and his identity for a pretence that ultimately, as the narrative's ending suggests, cannot salve his ego.

Of the stories selected for discussion in this study, the protagonist of "They're Not Your Husband" probably inspires in the reader the least pity. Rather than defend his wife against the chauvinistic sniggering of the two men, Earl internalises their remarks and begins to obsess over his wife's weight [17]. Doreen is in effect objectified and dehumanised, first by the men in business suits and then by Earl. These three characters voyeuristically appropriate Doreen's body in order to gratify their own ends: the men in suits derive a cheap sense of pleasure from mocking Doreen, and

[17] In a fascinating and very concise reading of "They're Not Your Husband", John Magee contends that language, a series of codes inscribed in the text, is the key device through which Carver 'exposes' Earl Ober. The name, 'Earl Ober', he points out, is an anagram of 'real bore' and if the letter 'c' is dropped from the word 'closer' (Earl insists that he is a good 'closer') it becomes 'loser'. The name 'Doreen, if the letters are rearranged, becomes 'redone', suggesting that Earl has 'redone his wife in "selling" her on the idea of losing weight' (Magee, 1995: 180).

Earl, in trying to prove that he is not ‘a joker who likes his quim fat’, wields a negative influence over his wife. The men’s scrutiny of Doreen’s body is, moreover, tantamount to an invasion of her privacy.

The menace of this narrative is caused as much by the men’s covert violation of Doreen’s right to privacy as the representation of an individual spiralling out of control. Earl’s obsession with Doreen’s weight acquires a faintly sinister aspect in the narrative, forcing the reader’s sympathies to lie largely with Doreen. This is mainly because Doreen is oblivious to the fact that her husband is covertly scrutinizing her body and manipulating her into losing weight in order to fulfil his self-serving desires. Earl’s own silence about the event in the coffee shop is one of the most conspicuous silences in the text. This silence forces the reader to search for reasons that explain why the puerile gibes of the men in business suits have perturbed him so much. Earl’s obsessive monitoring of Doreen’s weight loss shows an individual who is projecting his own feelings of social inadequacy onto his wife - an individual who is intent on making over his wife so that he can live up to a shallow and superficial stereotype of male ‘success’: the slim wife. In Earl’s dangerously misguided endeavours to assert control over his life – his intent to turn Doreen into an object of desire (a figure whom other men will admire and thereby validate indirectly his own existence) – the reader sees an individual who fails to see the irrationality of his fixation with his wife’s weight. So caught up in the need to prove his worth and redirect deep-seated feelings of professional and personal failure, Earl refuses to heed the damage that he is causing to Doreen’s health and to see the foolishness of his own behaviour.

Although Earl’s behaviour would incite feminist critics (his behaviour is, inarguably, an insidious form of domestic abuse), Carver provides a glimpse of him that directs the reader’s attention to the hidden landscape, the well of masked anxiety, which lies

beneath his actions. By investing this glimpse with his or her own 'subjective elements', the reader begins to form some idea of Earl's sentiments. In recognising that Earl feels overwhelmed by his lack of employment and his lack of money, the reader begins to sympathise with him. The scene that follows the incident in the coffee shop opens with an image of Earl lying alone in bed, literally and metaphorically stripped of all bravado and ego:

> He checked on the children and then went to the other bedroom and took off his clothes. He pulled the covers up, closed his eyes, and allowed himself to think. *The feeling started in his face and worked down into his stomach and legs* [my italics]. He opened his eyes and rolled his head back and forth on the pillow. Then he turned on his side and fell asleep (35).

Carver omits to explain what 'the feeling' is that overwhelms Earl, but, from the use of the definite article 'the', as opposed to the indefinite article 'a', the suggestion is that this is not the first time that Earl has experienced such a 'feeling'. Carver thereby shows the intensity of Earl's anxieties. Complaints that Carver denies his readers access to the thoughts and feelings of his characters and that he, in effect, alienates his own readers are frequent enough in critical readings of Carver's fiction. Fried's theory of absorption provides a plausible counter to such complaints. Earl's self-absorption on the bed absorbs the reader in turn into his interior monologue. Because the reader has to imagine what Earl is thinking and feeling, he or she is moved into a position of sympathetic identification with him and is compelled to see beyond his faults. Carver's negations therefore make it possible for the reader to co-construct the consciousnesses of his characters. In doing so, the reader is drawn further into the narrative action and is forced to imagine and assess the sentiments of others.

In the narrative silence between evening and morning, Earl resolves to re-make his wife. The reader is forced to imagine in this silence the intense self-dialoguing that has occupied Earl since going to bed and waking the next morning. Earl redefines his attitude to his wife and his marriage as he decides upon a course of action that will, he believes mistakenly, eradicate his problems: he replaces open communication for a mode of subterfuge. Omitting to disclose the real reasons for his 'concern' about his wife's weight, he convinces an initially reluctant Doreen that she ought to 'lose a few pounds' (35), believing that this is the first step toward reclaiming control of his life. After talking avidly about different types of diet, Earl proposes that all she really needs to do is, 'Just quit eating …. For a few days, anyway' (36). Earl's desperation to see Doreen lose weight blinds him to the recklessness of his words. Doreen's weight is, of course, only a problem for Earl, who has transferred his hidden anxieties about his unemployment into surface anxieties about his wife's weight. Carver exploits the irony of Earl's act of selling Doreen a diet in order to underscore his failure to grasp the real cause of his problems. As Earl forces Doreen to confront a problem that does not exist – her weight – so he withdraws from a problem that does – his unemployment. As Earl instructs Doreen to look at herself in the mirror, to which she inquires, 'What am I supposed to see?' (35), the full irony of his instruction is imparted: it is Earl who fails to see the risk of what he is doing and who flinches from seeing in the mirror a reflection of his professional and personal failure [18].

Even though Earl succeeds in 'selling' Doreen a diet, this sale is of great cost not only to Doreen's health, but also to his own mental end emotional stability. Earl's incommunicativeness increases as the narrative develops, which, in itself, is an indication of his underlying unhappiness. Carver shows how Earl exacerbates his problems as he tries desperately to solve them. Earl's loss of perspective shows in

[18] Mirrors occur frequently in Carver's fiction and are, as Boxer and Phillips contend, 'an emblem of Carverian dissociation' (Boxer and Phillips: 277). The idea of dissociation will be picked up again in my discussion of "Neighbors".

his erratic temperament: his emotions swing violently from profound discontent and disconsolation (the image of Earl on the bed), to explosive anger, to false public ebullience (his antics in the coffee shop). Alienated and frustrated (even the children ignore him when he arrives home from an interview one afternoon, too absorbed in the television to greet him), Earl's repressed emotions surface when he finds Doreen breaking her diet one afternoon (before her night shift at the coffee shop). He explodes and calls her a 'slob' (37). Resorting to emotional blackmail, he then tells his wife to '*go ahead eat! Go on eat!*' (37). Doreen, fearing that she has disappointed Earl, assures him that she is 'going to try again' (37). She does – she practically 'quits eating'. Even after Doreen tells Earl that her colleagues are beginning to express concern about how much weight she has lost, and even after she has to spend, ironically, part of the rent money on a new uniform for work, Earl encourages her to keep losing weight, asking, 'What is wrong with losing? … 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' (38). The absence of the word 'weight' from Earl's opening question, 'What is wrong with losing?', is probably the single most important omission in the entire narrative: Earl unwittingly announces his subliminal fear that he is a loser. This is a clear example of how Carver forces his readers to pay careful attention to his words - and to his omissions. The reader invests this blank with meanings that transcend the surface dialogue and thereby realises the submerged landscape of the narrative. The irruption of Earl's subconscious into the surface action of the narrative is exemplary of how Carver transforms even the most trivial of situations into powerful examinations of the human psyche.

The final 'scene' of "They're Not Your Husband" takes place in Doreen's coffee shop and mirrors with increasing tension the narrative's opening scene as Earl mimics the sexist behaviour of the two men in business suits and ends up making a complete fool of himself. Indicating Doreen, whom he pretends not to know, Earl asks one of

the waitresses who her ‘friend’ (39) is and mentions that she ‘looks a lot different’ (39) than the last time he was at the coffee shop. In this scene, Carver suggests that Earl is lost in a quagmire of self-deception: he continues the pretence that he fabricated on his first visit to the coffee shop. The waitress replies curtly, ‘I wouldn’t know’ (39), refusing to be roped into conversation about Doreen. Earl, desperate to hear someone say something about Doreen’s weight loss that will affirm that he is not a failure, regales a man who is sitting at the counter with a stream of boorish talk (39-40). The tension in this scene converges around Earl’s embarrassing attempts to evince from this man, who is clearly annoyed by Earl and his inappropriate conversation, an affirmation that Doreen is attractive, ‘What do you think of that? I’m telling you something. Listen. Look at the ass on her’ (40). The man does not react, causing Earl to try even harder to elicit from him a positive reaction. Earl says to the man, ‘Now you watch this’ and then orders an ice-cream sundae, knowing that Doreen’s skirt will ride up her legs to reveal her new, thinner thighs. The narrative ends on a note of extreme tension when Doreen is asked directly by the other waitress, who has just seen the man reading the newspaper get up to leave because of Earl, ‘Who is this character?’ … Who is this joker, anyway?’. The question is suspended in mid-air as both the waitress and the man wait expectantly to hear her reply. Earl, now the centre of attention, ‘put[s] on his best smile … and [holds] it until he [feels] his face pulling out of shape’ (40). In a single sentence, Carver again manages to convey Earl’s emotional landscape, his sudden and crushing realisation that he is, in the eyes of the people who are now scrutinizing him, a ‘joker’. Doreen eventually replies, in a reversal of Earl’s pretending that she is not his wife, that, ‘He’s a salesman. He’s my husband’ (40). Doreen then gives Earl his ice-cream sundae and proceeds to ‘total up his cheque’ (when Earl first goes to the coffee shop it is to see where Doreen works, but also to ‘see if he could order something on the house’ (34)). The narrative ends here, the innuendo being that Earl has, quite literally, received his ‘just deserts’.

Despite the fact that the tables are turned on Earl - that he becomes in public an object of disapprobation and embarrassment - the reader feels compelled to sympathise with him. Sympathy for Earl is generated via the omissions, what the reader sees hidden behind Earl's desperate attempts to prove that he is not a loser.

"Neighbors"

"Neighbors" is, after "Cathedral", the one narrative most frequently cited in scholarship on Carver. Published in 1976, but conceived six years earlier, "Neighbors" exemplifies many of the stylistic elements and themes of what William Stull calls Carver's 'formative years' (Stull: 2) – lexical economy and restraint, the absence of exposition and resolution, and domestic dissolution. "Neighbors" has no doubt sparked the interest of critics for its stark representation of a couple 'obsessed with vicariousness' (Nesset, 1991: 295), a theme that Carver develops far more explicitly in "The Idea"[19], Vern and his wife being, as Kirk Nesset observes, older versions of Bill and Arlene Miller. Of "Neighbors", Carver himself has said:

> I think the story is, more or less, an artistic success. My only fear is that it is too thin, too elliptical and subtle, too inhuman. … I do not see it as … a story that is ultimately remembered … for the breadth and depth and lifelike sentiment of its characters. … the internal and external truths and values in the story do not have much to do … with character, or some of the other virtues held dear in short fiction (Carver, 2000: 178).

This statement raises questions about the structure and style of the narrative. Carver's concern that "Neighbors" is, as a literary and artistic work, 'too thin, too

[19] In "The Idea", Carver presents a 'double-act' of voyeuristic behaviour. Vern and his wife spy regularly on a man who, in turn, plays the role of a 'peeping Tom' as his wife undresses provocatively in their bedroom.

elliptical and subtle, too inhuman' could of course be argued from one of either side of the minimalist-maximalist fence. The radical economy of "Neighbors" could be said to impede the narrative's quest to project a complex portrait of a relationship in the initial stages of dissolution. Like many of Carver's pre-*Cathedral* narratives, the exclusive focus on the external behaviour of the characters could be argued to elide their mental and emotional interiority and prevent them from attaining the kind of psychological authenticity that is, Carver maintains, a requisite feature of good fiction. Moreover, the 'internal and external truths and values' of the narrative would seem to rise from ethical questions around voyeurism, rather than rising directly from a compellingly 'lifelike' representation of human emotion and sentiment.

"Neighbors" can, on the other hand, be defended against Carver's own fear that the narrative's asceticism prevents it from being 'a story that is ultimately remembered for its breadth and depth'. It is interesting to note that the original manuscript for "Neighbors", formerly titled "The Neighbors"[20], was nearly twice as long as the final, published text. This would indicate that Carver cut certain parts of the original manuscript for aesthetic reasons: Carver's negations are not only a part of his writing process, but are a part of his authorial strategy to engage the reader, to invite the reader to fill in the details of the his characters' lives. At a thematic level, the narrative's asceticism mirrors the emptiness of the Millers' lives and reinforces their desire to experience vicariously the Stones' seemingly 'fuller and brighter life' (Carver: 1995: 68). Even though the Millers' emotional and psychological interiority is elided, submerged within the silences of the narrative, Carver cannot be accused of denying his readers access to their interior life, for in reading their actions, the reader constructs the impulses that govern their behaviour and is thereby absorbed into the narrative. In adding these subjective elements, the reader establishes his or her

[20] Gordon Lish, the fiction editor of *Esquire* in the early 1970s, recommended the change of title.

relation to the text. Carver intimates in the first paragraph that the Millers are bored with their mediocre lives, at a loss to explain how they, unlike their friends, and their neighbours in particular, have not been able to achieve the financial success that could buy them a more exciting life. The reader, in placing himself or herself in the same situation as the Millers, gains an understanding of the emotional subtext that motivates the characters' actions. Identification with the characters is produced because the reader superimposes his or her own referents onto the narrative in order to determine how the characters perceive the world and understand their motivations for their actions.

Identification is also made possible by virtue of the fact that the reader is assigned the role of a voyeur. The absence of an authorial voice that intervenes to shape the reader's responses creates the illusion of characters completely immersed in the chaos of their own lives. This evokes in the reader the uneasy feeling that he or she is trespassing on the private exploits of the characters - watching voyeuristically the 'spectacle' of their lives in the process of disintegrating. The dual role of voyeurism - voyeurism as theme and as strategy to involve the reader - makes "Neighbors", upon close critical analysis, an extremely complex narrative. Carver subverts one of the main conventions of short fiction - the emergence of the 'internal and external truths' of the narrative out of the schemes of character and action - by exploiting the dialectics of the text-reader relationship. By forcing the reader to experience being a voyeur of the lives of others, Carver makes the reader almost complicit with the Millers' aberrant behaviour. The reader's own experience of voyeurism therefore generates an extremely profound, even if disconcerting, truth - Carver manages to capture the essence of voyeurism by making his readers voyeurs of the lives of the Millers who, in turn, are voyeurs of the lives of the Stones.

However, voyeurism as a strategy to involve the reader destabilizes the narrative's transparent realism because the reader is alerted to his or her 'decoding attitudes'. The reader's imaginative copies of the characters' thoughts and feelings are necessarily informed by his or her own ethical, social and political views about voyeurism. Yet, as the reader is implicated in the act of voyeurism, he or she is prevented from invoking the referents that would dismiss categorically the Millers' behaviour as reprehensible. Negation therefore forces the reader to reassess his or her points of reference and manoeuvres him or her into a position of sympathetic alignment with the Millers [21].

To argue that the theme of voyeurism is the only device that facilitates sympathetic identification would be inaccurate, for it is also Carver's intimation of the Millers' profound underlying discontent that produces such an effect. This intimation further subverts the reader's inclination to condemn the Millers because he or she sees a couple trying desperately to find an outlet from the boredom and frustration of their lives. The narrative opens with the line 'Bill and Arlene Miller were a happy couple' (Carver, 1995: 68). This statement is immediately thrown into doubt by the word 'but' in the next sentence: 'But now and then they felt that they alone among their circle had been passed by somehow, leaving Bill to attend to his bookkeeping duties and Arlene occupied with secretarial chores' (Carver: 68). When the Stones ask the Millers to feed their cat and to water their plants while they are on vacation in Arkansas, what starts out as a routine obligation becomes, almost immediately, a sexually-motivated compulsion for the Millers: they begin to live vicariously through the Stones, taking a vacation from their own ''minimal' lives' (Scobie, 273) by invading the Stones' apartment. The apartment becomes, as Stull writes, 'a psycho-

[21] The reader's sympathetic identification with the Millers certainly does not mean that he or she has waived his or her moral right to object to their actions, but simply that the reader has viewed the situation from the perspective of the Millers - imagined the thoughts and feelings that impelled them to search for alternatives to their humdrum lives.

sexual rumpus room' (Stull, quoted by Nesset, 1991: 296) in which the Millers play out their fantasy of leading lives other than their own. Yet, the couple's immersion in a 'perilous game' (Nesset, 1991: 296) of fantasy and 'emotional parasitism' (Dean Flower, quoted by Nesset, 1991: 296) has, as David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips argue, made them 'voyeurs … of their own experience' (Boxer and Phillips: 76). Their dissociation from their own identities and lives drives them instinctively to 'reach out toward otherness … [to forge] identification[s] with … distant, unattainable idea[s] of self' (Boxer and Phillips: 75). In identifying with such 'unattainable ideas of self', the Millers are given 'sudden, astonishing glimpses behind the curtain that separates their empty lives from chaos' (Boxer and Phillips: 76). Indeed, the apartment 'across the hall', (this phrase is a refrain in the narrative), becomes a symbol of everything that is absent in the Millers' lives and relationship - the sterile emblems and accoutrements of success and happiness that the Millers yearn for so desperately.

The injection of a new sexual dynamic and energy into the Millers' relationship is, however, nothing more than a deluded 'fix', an attempt to recover, as Kirk Nesset writes, the 'fading vitality of their marriage' (Nesset, 1991:295). The couple, instead of becoming closer and creating an enduring intimacy, actually become, like Earl Ober in 'They're Not Your Husband', distanced both from each other and from their own lives, spending less time together in their own apartment and more time each on their own in the separate apartments. Conversation between the couple eventually ceases. If they are together, they spend time staring vacantly at each other from across the empty boxes of their take-away dinners, or else engaging in sex with phantom versions of each other. Sex and the Stones become for Bill and Arlene Miller diversions from the routine and boredom of their own lives. Yet, as boredom is replaced by prurient obsession, the couple is 'drawn deeper and deeper into an abyss of [their] own making' (Carver, 1995: 177).

Carver's 'stylized treatment of the subject matter' reinforces his aim to show a couple engineering their own self-destruction, a couple who, as Nesset writes, begin 'to toy with borrowed versions of love, conspiring to bankrupt themselves, both sexually and spiritually' (Nesset: 1991: 297). Carver employs the stereotypes, clichés and conventions of the suburban melodrama in order to magnify the Millers' descent into an abyss of secretive social deviance. His neo-realist allegiances are indeed apparent from his utilization of the themes of daytime television – the hidden jealousies that exist between individuals, and which inevitably corrupt all relationships. In "Neighbors", Carver translates the ubiquitous suburban syndrome of 'keeping up with the Joneses' into an extremely subversive narrative that could be counted as a critique of capitalism and middle class materialism. Without the financial resources to remain on a social par with their neighbours, the Millers not only covet the Stones' apartment and lifestyle, but also - and more disconcertingly - trade their own identities for a vicarious experience of an idealized American materialism.

The menace of "Neighbors" is caused by the discrepancy between the surface veneer of suburban conviviality and propriety, and the subsurface undercurrents of salacious desire and domestic dysfunction. This menace is, as Boxer and Phillips write, 'hidden behind Carver's ironic, deadpan style' (Boxer and Phillips: 76). Carver stylizes the interactions of the four neighbours – conversation is trite, the Millers' repressing their secret envy beneath their outward show of neighbourliness. As soon as the farewells have been performed ('Have fun'; 'You kids have fun too', 'Thanks again you guys' (68)), the veneer of suburban civility is subverted as Carver traces the Millers' gradual descent into obsessive vicariousness.

Carver intimates early in the narrative that the Millers are 'heading for confrontations with unacknowledged regions of their own selves' (Boxer and Phillips: 76), confrontations which will inevitably corrupt their relationship. Delaying the Millers'

ultimate confrontation with these 'unacknowledged regions of their own selves' until the end of the narrative (their disclosure to each other of their willingness to extend the boundaries of their erotic proclivities), Carver focuses initially on the sublimated acts of vicarious identification that lead up to this violent confrontation. An undercurrent of disquiet is introduced when Bill first ventures across the hall to the Stones' apartment to feed Kitty, 'He took a deep breath as he entered the Stones' apartment. The air was already heavy and it was vaguely sweet' (68-69). The words 'heavy' and 'vaguely sweet' suggest that Bill is immediately seduced by the promise of finding thrilling sanctuary in the Stones' apartment. As he crosses the threshold of the Stones' apartment, he leaves behind his dreary existence, titillated by the prospect of languishing in an exotic otherness. Having free reign to do as he pleases, he moves leisurely around the apartment and pries shamelessly into the Stones' private lives. Bill's act of exhuming the private lives of the Stones' is a sign of his plaintive dream of acquiring a more exciting life. Although his prying makes the reader feel ill at ease, it, nevertheless, draws him or her into the action: the reader, through Bill, is taken on a 'tour' of the Stones' apartment. Despite the fact that the Stones are absent for most of the narrative, the reader is able to create, from the glimpses of their apartment that Carver provides, a vivid portrait of who they are and how they lead their lives. Just as the reader imaginatively constructs a fuller picture of the Millers' lives, excavating beneath the surface of their discontent, so the reader imaginatively constructs a fuller picture of the Stones' lives by examining the metonymic descriptions of their apartment.

With each visit that Bill makes to the Stones' apartment, his desire to pry into their lives is fuelled.[22] Bill's preoccupation with the Stones' apartment is suggested by his

[22] Over the course of a few days, Bill's prying becomes progressively more invasive and brazen. On his first visit, he reads the labels of the bottles of medicine that he finds in the bathroom cabinet and drinks the Stones' Chivas Regal (out of the bottle). On his second visit (he leaves work fifteen minutes earlier than usual), he opens the kitchen cupboards and

restlessness and his reticence – his inability to concentrate either at work or at home, and his awkward silence when he is around his wife. Just as Earl Ober's silence about his anxieties draws the reader into the recesses of his mind, so Bill Miller's silence forces the reader to imagine his emotional and psychological interiority. The silence that ensues between Bill and Arlene Miller, which is caused by Bill's identification with a delusory and empty idea of social amelioration, is a tangible force in the narrative. This silence engages the reader: Carver elides both characters' thoughts and feelings, particularly Arlene's - whom Bill has more or less forgotten since he started going to the Stones' apartment - about the dissolution of their marriage. The reader adds the 'subjective elements' that have been excised from the narrative and identifies sympathetically with a couple who fail to realize the destructive impact of their behaviour on their marriage.

Bill's vicarious identification with the Stones strikes an extremely sinister note later in the narrative. On his third visit to the apartment, his subliminal desire to appropriate not only the Stones' apartment, but their lives, is signalled through his unmistakeably symbolic act of trying on both Jim's and Harriet's clothes. As he lies on the Stones' bed, he wonders if the couple will ever return from their vacation and reflects that since their departure, he has forgotten their 'faces … the way they talked and dressed' (71). The Stones have, as Bill has assimilated into his own identity pieces of their lives, been erased. Deciding to re-create the image of the Stones, he 'shed[s]' (71) his own clothes and constructs different versions of Jim Stone, trying on first a Hawaiian shirt and a pair of Bermuda shorts, and then one of Jim's business suits. In trying on these clothes, Bill physically rehearses his transformation into Jim Stone, the neighbour who is often able to 'combine business with pleasure trips' (68). Bill's obsession with the Stones, his desire to assume their identities, culminates when he

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inspects their contents, takes a bite out of the cheese in the fridge and steals a half-empty packet of cigarettes from the nightstand drawer in the Stones' bedroom.

decides to try on Harriet's clothes, including her underwear. This is far more than a 'kinky' act of transvestism, however, for Carver excludes any suggestion of sexual titillation on Bill's part and immediately presents an extremely pathetic image of Bill Miller, alone and lost in thought. Bill walks into the living room and falls into a state of frieze-like contemplativeness, staring out of the window from behind the curtain of his own unfulfilled longing. In this protracted silence, the reader plumbs the depths of Bill's mind, seeing an individual who understands at a subconscious level that his self-negating identifications will lead him into an abyss of discontent.

The final scene of 'Neighbors' inverts the pattern (Bill goes to the Stones' apartment, Arlene remains in theirs, the couple have intercourse when he returns) that the narrative has up to this point followed: Arlene decides to go to the Stones' apartment to feed the cat. She, like Bill on his visits, spends an inordinately long time in the apartment. When asked by Bill what took her so long to feed the cat, she replies, 'I guess I must have been playing with Kitty' (72), an echo of Bill's words to her after his first visit to the apartment across the hall. That Arlene, like Bill, has found the experience extremely exciting is suggested by her elliptical admission, 'It's funny … You know – to go in someone's place like that' (72). Bill notices that 'the color [is] high in her cheeks' and that there is a piece of white lint on the back of her sweater (73). He suspects, like the reader, that Arlene has been rummaging in the Stones' bedroom (the Stones' bedcover is white). As the couple stand at the door of their apartment, Arlene tells Bill that she found some 'pictures' and then says, giving voice to Bill's own fanciful wish that the Stones do not return, 'Maybe they won't come back' (73). This remark signals the couple's joint initiation into a life of vicariousness. The couple, in affirming each other's desire to yield completely to a dangerous game of psychosexual role-play, foreclose the possibility of ever re-discovering themselves or each other.

That the couple has foreclosed the possibility of recovering the former intimacy and 'normality' of their relationship – of finding their former selves - is suggested by the narrative's truncated ending (which indicates that the Millers' problems are just beginning): Arlene realises that she has left the key inside the Stones' apartment. The couple has, the implication is, locked themselves out of the apartment in which their new, borrowed identities are inscribed. Standing in the corridor between the Stones' apartment and their own, the couple have been displaced literally and metaphorically to a transitional space void of meaning. Holding each other, the couple 'lean into the door [of the Stones' apartment] as if against a wind, and brace themselves' (73). The absence of resolution further absorbs the reader into the drama of the Millers' lives: the reader is forced to imagine what occurs in the silence between the Millers leaning into the door in a state of fearful uncertainty, and the Stones returning from their vacation to find that their privacy has been violated by their trusted neighbours. The Millers brace themselves against the threat of an imminent future where relationships themselves are bound to come to a truncated end.

"Furious Seasons"

"Furious Seasons", 'marks', according to Tess Gallagher in her foreword to *Call If You Need Me*, 'Carver's beginning, with Faulkner and Joyce as mentors' (Gallagher in Carver, 2000: xiv). The first of Carver's narratives that went to press, "Furious Seasons" is notable for being one of his most experimental: the influence of Faulkner and Joyce shows in Carver's use of stream-of-consciousness [23] to represent Lew Farrell's state of intense preoccupation. Like the voyeurism in "Neighbors", "Furious

[23] Allusions to the modernist elements of "Furious Seasons" are intended to show that this narrative is compositionally atypical of many of Carver's stories. The fragmented structure of this narrative is unusual in Carver's work, which generally follows a linear pattern of cause and effect.

Seasons" deals with an issue that tests the boundaries of social and ethical tolerance: incest. Unlike "Neighbors", however, "Furious Seasons" cannot be accused of being 'inhuman' or 'thin' either in content or in style. The issue of incest is focalised through the consciousness of an individual paralysed by fear and by guilt, who is subject to a melancholia and emotional violence the full force of which is communicated via a profusion of symbols (heavy rain, mist, hunting, earthquakes, rivers, funeral boats and darkness) that add to the narrative's oppressive *mise en scène*.

In terms of its length alone, "Furious Seasons" could mistakenly be thought to belong to Carver's later, more expansive and descriptive style of writing. Indeed, the evocative, 'poetic' moodiness of such descriptions as the mountain landscape and the inclement weather, which is a foreboding presence in the narrative, is absent in much of Carver's pre-*Cathedral* fiction. Even though this narrative is, at approximately seventeen pages, longer than most of Carver's other narratives, it reveals, in contrast to "A Small, Good Thing", for instance, only the barest information about the characters, their relationships and their histories. Of all Carver's narratives, "Furious Seasons" requires the reader to make the most rigorous intellectual and emotional investments: the narrative's opaque omissions establish relentless, to recall Chenetier's words, 'contact between the struggling nature of the object and the reader's decoding attitudes at the reception end of the line'. This contact is especially acute in "Furious Seasons" because Carver destabilizes the conventions of realist fiction by replacing the unities of action, place and time with a highly structured disunity, making the narrative seem highly modernist in style and form. Typically, Carver abandons exposition and resolution in this narrative and elides the critical events upon which it is based. Atypically, he implodes linear time by presenting the narrative from deep within the consciousness of a protagonist whose mind shifts randomly between fragmented recollections of the past and the present. This

compositional fragmentation compels the reader to search actively for clues that will enable him or her to make sense of the extremely ambiguous relationships and events depicted in the narrative.

The ambiguity that surrounds Farrell's and Iris's relationship is caused by a number of extremely conspicuous omissions. The narrative is plagued by an excess of unanswered questions: Why has Iris been living with her brother and his wife? Who is the father of Iris's baby? Why is Farrell's and Iris's relationship infused with an intensity and sexual dynamic that is curiously absent from Farrell's relationship with his wife? These questions become even more disquieting in the face of the unspeakable event that occurs in the intervening narrative silence between Farrell receiving the news of his sister's pregnancy and recalling, at the very end of the narrative, placing a 'heavy, blood soaked' (144) towel in the clothes hamper. These silences can be resolved, however, by decoding clues found in the narrative's symbols. The recurrent images of rain, rivers and hunting contain subtle, indirect connections between Farrell's experiences in the present and his recollections of a lost, damaged childhood. As the reader makes these links, he or she begins gradually to determine the nature of Farrell's and Iris's relationship and is equipped with an array of textual weapons with which to excavate the event around which there is an impregnable and palpable silence. Carver's negations operate in precisely the terms that Iser specifies: the reader fills in the blanks of the narrative with 'images' that enable him or her to realise the narrative's terrifying subtext. The elision of the narrative's critical event engages the reader actively as the reader is forced to imagine the event that has taken place in the shadowy backwaters of the siblings' lives. The reader's investments are guided by the 'patterns of the text' – the concrete words that, to recall Iser's words, 'manoeuvre [the reader] into a position commensurate to the intentions of the text'. This convergence of the text's potential meanings and the reader's investments brings the work into existence: the reader

inscribes his or her own author-aided version of events in the lacunas and interstitial spaces of the narrative. The reader can never be certain, however, of the correctness of his or her investments and perceptions because he or she is forced, as Jon Powell writes in his article "The Stories of Raymond Carver: The Menace of Perpetual Uncertainty", to 'battle *between* different readings' (Powell, 1994: 647) of the textual clues. This uncertainty produces the menace of the narrative, a menace that builds incrementally and which apexes in the image of the police car at the end of the narrative. The reader is left completely in the dark about what has befallen Iris (or Farrell's wife) since Farrell left his apartment, the morning following the news of Iris's pregnancy, to go hunting in the canyons with his friend, Frank. The realism of the narrative is destabilized because the reader is required to decode the patterns of the text in order to uncover the hidden events. As the reader searches for connections between words and symbols, he or she is reminded of the cognitive operations involved in the act of reading – how he or she interprets the author's representation of the world.

One of the most important symbols in the narrative is that of rain, which is introduced in the first paragraph. The storm that builds in the distant hills symbolises the tumult of emotions that eventually will take Farrell captive:

> Rain threatens. Already the tops of the hills across the valley are obscured by the heavy gray mist. Quick shifting black clouds and white furls and caps are coming from the hills, moving down the valley and passing over the fields and vacant lots in front of the apartment house (129).

As swiftly as the black clouds move down the valley and pass over the fields and vacant lots in front of Farrell's apartment, imparting a sense of impending, all-encompassing threat, so the narrative moves into Farrell's consciousness:

> If Farrell lets go his imagination he can see the clouds as black horses with flared white manes and, turning behind, slowly, inexorably, black chariots, here and there a white plumed driver (129).

This paragraph determines the overall pattern of the narrative: the narrative shifts constantly in and out of Farrell's mind, becoming a series of fragmented, disconnected, partial recollections. These recollections are evoked by the associative resonance they bear to the single recollection that dominates the narrative: Farrell's inability to erase the memory of Iris telling him that she is pregnant and the event, which is omitted from the narrative, that occurred immediately after he received this news. The constant deferral and submersion of information within the silences of the narrative - within the suppressed links between these recollections - causes the reader to probe beneath the 'concrete words' to find the implicit parallels between Farrell's recollections of the past and the present, and to discover the event about which he remains guardedly silent. Most of all, the reader searches for clues that might allay the constant sense of disorientation that the narrative's compositional fragmentation and strategic silence induces.

Because Carver abandons exposition, the reader is thrust immediately into a situation fraught with 'puzzling gaps'. The narrative shifts from an image of Farrell waving goodbye to his wife on the steps of their apartment[24] (this is when he observes the clouds), to an image of Farrell re-entering his apartment and seeing Iris

[24] The reader has no reason to suspect that Farrell's and his wife's relationship has ended because she turns and smiles at him at the bottom of the steps before getting into her car and later she and Farrell are seen lying in bed together.

(her relation to Farrell is, at this point, unknown) exiting the bathroom in a robe. The reader is disoriented because he or she is given the faint impression that Farrell and Iris are lovers. This impression becomes stronger as this scene progresses: Farrell sits in an armchair, studying Iris as she sits at the dresser and brushes her hair in 'long, sweeping, rhythmical strokes' (129). The physical and emotional intimacy between the couple is implied by Farrell's inordinately close observation of Iris and the mood of quiet, private domesticity. Carver introduces, however, an undercurrent of dark and ominous melancholia to this scene of heightened domesticity in an astonishingly powerful image suggestive of the battle of conscience taking place within Farrell's own mind - a battle that begins in concert with the furious rain that, almost as soon as Iris has spoken the words, 'Lew, … you know I'm pregnant?' (130), begins to beat down on the apartment:

> He looks up at the window, now, a mirror, seeing himself and, behind, Iris sitting at the dresser watching him, with another darker Farrell staring into another window beside her (130).

In this image of the couple watching multiple, displaced selves reflected in the triad of window-mirrors, Carver intimates that Farrell and Iris share more than familial blood – he implies that they are each complicit in a dark secret that only they alone can know. This secret is hidden in the dark silences of the text. Farrell himself remains silent on hearing these words and switches off the lamp, throwing the room literally, and the secret figuratively, into darkness. His reaction to the news of Iris's pregnancy is communicated obliquely: in Farrell's analysis of the 'two-page picture of a disaster scene, an earthquake somewhere in the Near East' (130) contained in the magazine that he was reading before Iris spoke, the reader sees the violent impact of this news on his emotional and psychological bearing. The reader, at this point, begins to

suspect that the couple are involved in an incestuous relationship and that Farrell is the father of Iris's baby.

The narrative, at this juncture, begins to move steadily into Farrell's consciousness. As Carver foregrounds Earl's recollection of a similarly disturbing experience, so the connection between events becomes less distinct, forcing the reader to examine textual details that, in the absence of authorial interpretation, become signposts to the submerged events of the narrative. In stunned disbelief, Farrell 'closes the magazine and lets it slip out of his lap as he stands' (130). Before entering the bathroom, he asks, 'What are you going to do?' (130), noticing, as though he is disconnected from himself, that the words are 'dry, hurrying like old leaves into the dark corners of the room' (130). The same instant that Farrell speaks these words, he feels that 'the question has already been asked by someone else, a long time ago' (130). Farrell's mind returns at this point to his and Iris's childhood, the sound of the 'short, fluttery swishes' (131) of the rain against the bathroom window evoking the recollection of the day that Iris gave him a 'Snowflake cracker box' (131) containing a white bird whose soft 'fluttering' (131) had ceased. Farrell, in response to Iris's question, 'What are you going to do?', throws the bird into the river and imagines that before a funeral boat on the Nile starts to 'burn up … the white bird will fly out and into his father's fields someplace where he will hunt out the bird in some thick growth of green meadow grass, eggs and all. He runs along the bank, the brush whipping his pants, and once a limb hits him on the ear, and it still hasn't burned. He pulls loose some rocks from the bank and begins throwing them at the boat. And then the rain begins; huge, gusty, spattering drops that belt the water, sweeping across the river from one shore to another' (131). In this dream-like passage, Carver establishes the narrative's movement toward an implied death, the images of the funeral boat, the dead bird, and the melancholic river shores collectively foreshadowing Iris's death.

The paragraph that occurs immediately after Farrell has entered the bathroom (before he recollects throwing his sister's dead bird into the river), recurs at various stages throughout the narrative and conveys a sense of Farrell's sexual familiarity with his sister, her scent something that he will later, while she is sleeping, seek irresistibly [25]:

> It smells of Iris; a warm, moist odour, slightly sticky; New Spring talc and King's Idyll cologne. Her towel lies across the back of the toilet. In the sink she has spilled talcum. It is wet now and pasty and makes a thick yellow ring around the white sides. He rubs it out and washes it into the drain.
>
> He is shaving. By turning his head, he can see into the living room. Iris in profile sitting on the stool in front of the old dresser. He lays down the razor and washes his face, then picks up the razor again. At this moment he hears the first few drops of rain spatter against the roof … (130).

The repetition of this passage has a twofold purpose. The first of these is to reinforce Farrell's mental stasis - his inability to transcend the emotional deluge of a single, life-altering memory (the news of Iris's pregnancy). The second of these is to obscure the event that occurs subsequent to Farrell learning of Iris's pregnancy, and prior to

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[25] He picked up his things and went out on the porch. Iris was there, stretched out under the twisted pile of heavy quilts. Even as he hunted for a reason for the action, as if he were detached somehow, crouched on the other side of her bed watching himself go through this, at the same time knowing it was over, he moved toward her bed. Irresistibly he bent down over her figure, as if he hung suspended, all senses released except that of smell, he breathed deeply for the fleeting scent of her body, bending until his face was against her covers he experienced the scent again, for just an instant, and then it was gone (135).

Farrell's sexual desire for Iris is evident in this passage: his need to breathe in the 'fleeting scent of her body'. The reader's suspicion that something terrible has occurred in the silence between Farrell hearing the news of Iris's pregnancy and leaving to go hunting the next morning is aroused by Farrell's state of detachment as he bends over Iris, who lies as if in a state of restless convalescence under the 'twisted pile of heavy quilts'. Moreover, the reader asks 'what is over?' Has Farrell resolved to end his relationship with his sister? Has he ended Iris's pregnancy by taking things into his own hands?

him ‘carrying [Iris] out to the porch, turn[ing] her face to the wall, and cover[ing] her up’ (144), forcing the reader to imagine what takes place in the intervening silence between these two events. The details of Farrell’s sense perceptions as he stands in the bathroom are ‘burned’, like the image of the burning funeral boat on the Nile, into his memory. Farrell’s emotional landscape is communicated via the subtle connections between the memory of the dead bird and the feelings it evokes, and the feelings that the news of his sister’s pregnancy has evoked within him. Farrell’s action of washing away the mark left by Iris in the sink is a clue to the critical event that has been elided – his act of trying to erase the evidence of his sexual relationship with his sister.

Two sequences occur successively in the narrative that crystallise the initially faint impression that Farrell and Iris are involved in an incestuous relationship and that the product of their ‘assignation’ is an unborn child. The first passage occurs when Farrell, while sitting alone at the kitchen table in the early hours of the morning (he is waiting for his friend, Frank, to arrive), recalls sitting at the desk in his sister’s room drawing a picture of the valley where he used to live. Outside he can hear his father shouting at a man, the man shouting back and swearing at his father. He looks out of the window to find out what is happening and sees his father hauling a pulley away from the barn and two ‘big, red faced Canadians with greasy flannel hats, dragging the sheep toward his father’. What follows is a graphically visceral description of how the men kill the sheep and haul it up onto the pulley. The reader makes a connection between the slaughtering of the sheep and the event that has been written out of the text: the narrative implies, but never confirms, that Farrell has aborted the child that he has fathered. Like Farrell’s memory of the dead bird, so his memory of the dead sheep casts light onto the elided event. The associative resonance between Farrell’s recollection of placing ‘the heavy, blood-soaked towel’ in the hamper and then washing his hands, and his recollection of the ‘blood gush[ing] out over [his father’s]

hands' as he cut the throat of the sheep and then proceeds to disembowel it, its 'gray guts slid[ing] out of the *steaming* (my italics) belly and tumb[ling] onto the ground in a thick coil' (134), would indicate that Farrell has performed an abortion on Iris. The narrative then shifts abruptly as Farrell's thoughts turn to the memory of his sister walking into her bedroom wrapped in a towel, the scene resembling the image of Iris that the reader is first given. The connection between these recollections is to be found in the word 'steaming':

> He hears the chain in the bathroom rattle and then the water gurgling into the toilet. A moment later he turns toward the door as footsteps approach. His sister comes into the room, her body faintly *steaming* (my italics). For an instant she is frozen there in the doorway with the towel around her hair, one hand holding the ends together and the other on the doorknob. Her breasts are round and smooth-looking, the nipples like the stems of the warm porcelain fruit on the living room table. She drops the towel and it slides down, pulling at her neck, touching across her breasts and then heaping up at her foot. She smiles, slowly puts the hand to her mouth and pulls the door shut. He turns back to the window, his toes curling up in his shoes (135).

The sexual nature of Farrell's and Iris's relationship is suggested most strongly, if not confirmed, by this passage, the sensuous imagery and language tailored to show Farrell's [adolescent] sexual awareness and Iris's sexual forwardness and precocity. Other passages in the narrative suggest that their relationship is sexual. One such passage is Farrell's recollection, while sitting on the riverbank at the bottom of the canyon on the hunting trip, of the afternoon that he and Iris headed off (supposedly) for the hardware and grocery stores and failed to return at the specified time to collect Lorraine, Farrell's wife. The reader infers, from subtle implications within the

text, that it is on this outing that Iris and Farrell conceive a child. The reference to the orchards that the couple pass as they drive out of town carries much significance: the fruit of the orchard trees is symbolic of forbidden fruit, of Iris's and Farrell's forbidden passions. Iris's act of picking the 'heavy, yellow' (140) apples from the low branches of the trees, and Farrell's act of biting into one of the apples, its 'sweet juice squirt[ing] into his mouth' (140) as he does so, is an allusion to the Biblical Fall, to Adam and Eve's fall from grace and loss of innocence. These narrative details, rather than being superfluous, foreshadow Farrell and Iris's imminent capitulation to their erotic desires. Within a few sentences, Farrell stops the car and Iris places her hand on his lap. This gesture is a concrete sign of the couple's sexual intimacy and replicates Lorraine placing her hand on Farrell's thigh when they are driving on the Columbia Road through torrential weather to collect Iris, her words 'You're all mine, Lew. I hate to think of sharing you even for a little while with anybody. Even your own sister' (138) resonating ironically in the mind of the reader. The act of sex between Farrell and Iris is omitted, however: it occurs in the narrative silence between Iris laying her hand on her brother's lap, and Farrell getting out of the car to light a cigarette, which he eventually throws over the precipice and watches spin in a 'short, twisting arc … down into the valley' (141). This seemingly inconsequential detail is significant: the reader is reminded of the valley in which Farrell and Iris began their incestuous relationship. As Farrell stands in silence and watches the lit cigarette fall to the valley below, the reader imagines that he is thinking about his and Iris's childhood, and their inability to suppress, even in adulthood, their sexual desire for each other.

In the next paragraph, Farrell wakes from his anguished reverie. Watching the clouds above the canyon start to break up as the sun comes into view, and seeing a 'black line' of geese against the lowest clouds, Farrell begins to load his gun. In this sequence, Farrell 'hunt[s] out the white bird' of his childhood dream: he shoots three

birds, two of which he collects and then hides in the thick undergrowth of grass next to the river bank, thereby re-enacting his memory of disposing of Iris's dead bird. As he waits for Frank, he falls into a state of restless sleep. In this section, Carver shows that Farrell is 'caught between waking consciousness and the escape of sleep' (Boxer and Phillips: 76), incapable of finding, even in sleep, respite from the memories that haunt him. Carver inverts the romantic idiom of the restorative power of nature. Farrell is, in his solipsism, unable to find transcendent meanings that might provide answers to his predicament. The reader is denied access to Farrell's unbidden thoughts as he lies on the riverbank. These thoughts engender in Farrell an intense sense of terror, the cause of which the reader is left to determine. The mood of the narrative changes at this point, the narrative itself, as the sky above Farrell becomes 'a thickening gray pall' (143), building to an ominous close. The reader immediately associates the threat of rain with the narrative's opening paragraph - Farrell's prescience of impending disaster. More so than this, the reader recalls Farrell's own recollection of the torrential rain that begins after he has thrown Iris's white bird into the river on which a funeral boat starts to 'burn up'. Farrell starts to run frantically up the hill towards the car and 'presses the horn in a continual blast' (143) to alert Frank's attention. He tells Frank that he needs to go home. The rain begins as Frank and Farrell drive out of the mountains back to Yakima, the fog, which lifts as they turn onto the highway, 'layered somewhere in the dark over the car' (143). Farrell's intense emotional conflict is set off against Frank's casual observations about relationships – his advice to Farrell not to let his worries about things at home distract him too much. Frank laughs, heedless of the gravity of Farrell's situation, as he says, 'I know I used to be the same way. I remember…' (144). The word 'remember' triggers yet again in Farrell the memory of Iris telling him that she is pregnant. The bathroom scene is repeated, but the words 'It smells of Iris; a warm, moist odor, slightly sticky' (130) are replaced with the words, 'The smell sickens him' (144), his confusion of feelings - guilt, shame, anger and disgust –

suggested by the word ‘sickens’. The ‘escape’ that Farrell had sought in the mountains, in the rural pastimes of hunting and fishing, comes to an end as he and Frank approach the outskirts of the town, and pass ‘the long line of motels with their blazing red, blinking, neon lights, past the cafés with steamy windows, the cars clustered in front, and past the businesses, dark and locked until the next day’ (145). In this description, Carver paints a lurid picture of the cityscape, which contrasts sharply with the picturesque beauty of the canyons, and thereby foreshadows the terrible situation that will confront Farrell when he arrives home – the image of the lights of the police car parked in front of his apartment. Farrell is returning to the site of his problems, problems which, in his absence, have accrued and which, irrevocable, negate his chances of ever finding respite from the past. Farrell’s inability to escape his past is suggested by the cyclical structure of the journey out of, and back into, the city. Images of darkness and rain abound in the narrative and signify Farrell’s dark state of mind. A sense of Farrell’s intense, restless anxiety can be seen in the following description, an image that faintly resembles the image of Earl Ober lying in bed in ‘They’re Not Your Husband’:

> He pulled down into the quilts again and then because it was too hot and his hands were sweating, he threw back the close covers, twisting his fingers into the sheet, crushing it between his fingers and knotting it against his palms until they felt dry (132).

Awake and unable to sleep, Farrell listens to the rain outside, imagining it

> [coming] in clouds, lifting up in swells against the faint yellow light outside like myriads of tiny yellow insects coming furiously against the window, spitting and rippling (132).

He edges closer to his wife, but recoils violently from the prospect of being physically intimate with her because the sensation of her warm body 'floods' his mind with undisclosed memories of childhood. He gets out of bed and walks over to the window and sees:

> … a huge, foreign dream night outside. The street lamp a gaunt, scarred obelisk running up into the rain with a faint light holding to its point. At its base the street was black, shiny. Darkness swirled and pulled at the edges of the light (132).

The journey back into town occurs, like the journey out, in darkness. This darkness reinforces the idea that Frank cannot escape the emotional scars of either the present or the past.

Carver's negations continue even into the final section of the narrative. These negations refuse the reader a sense of cathartic closure. The absence of resolution in "Furious Seasons", as in most of Carver's narratives, shows the realist and anti-realist strains of his fiction. On the one hand, Carver creates the illusion of an indeterminate reality by showing that even as the reader reads the final words of the narrative, his characters' continue to be immersed in the tragedies and travesties of their own lives. On the other hand, this absence of resolution reminds the reader of the text's constructed nature. The transparent realism of the narrative is destabilized because the reader is forced to provide a conclusion, and is therefore made conscious of the mediating strategies of the narrative – the fact that he or she is being called upon to co-author the events of the narrative. The reader constructs the narrative's terrifying conclusion based on implied events.

As Frank turns into Farrell's street, Farrell sees, parked outside of his apartment, a car with the words 'SHERIFF'S OFFICE' painted across the trunk. Carver shows that Farrell is to be implicated in the event that has occurred since he left his apartment by focusing on Farrell's reaction: Farrell studies the car and notices that the front and backseats are divided by a glass panel 'inset with a wire screen making the backseat into a cage' (145). Farrell's fear at seeing the car forces the reader to suspect that his removal of the 'blood-soaked' towel from the bathroom is connected to the elided event in the text. Jokingly, and again completely unaware that Farrell is guarding a dark secret, Frank says, 'Could be he's after you, Lew … Maybe they've found out you were hunting with no license. Come on, I'll turn you in myself' (145). Frank's words direct the reader's suspicions onto Farrell: his involvement in, the reader assumes, the fatal outcome of a series of tragic events.

The narrative, while remaining open-ended, ends appropriately: Farrell gets out of the car and Frank drives off, stopping the car once to look back at his friend who is standing in the rain holding onto the wet tail fin of the sheriff's car, 'swaying a little', and staring up at the windows of his apartment. He can see 'blurred figures [standing] frieze-like at the windows looking down through the rain' (145). Farrell is, Carver implies, a figure of scrutiny – his 'secrets', if they have not been disclosed already, are about to be. The rain that Farrell had anticipated at the beginning of the narrative beats down on him - the 'smooth, wet (black) tail fin' of the sheriff's car is the 'black chariot' that he sees in the clouds, his presentiment of danger, death and destruction. As Farrell stands in the rain 'the gutter water rushe[s] over his feet, swirl[ing] frothing into a great whirlpool at the drain on the corner and rushed down to the centre of the earth' (145). In this powerful image, Carver shows that Farrell is overwhelmed by a 'whirlpool' of emotions – paralysed by the fear of an imminent confrontation with, the narrative implies, the death of his sister, whose name,

ironically, recalls the goddess, Iris, a messenger of the gods who would travel to earth on the arch of a rainbow.

Despite the omission of critical events in “Furious Seasons”, these events are suggested by the associative resonance between Farrell’s recollections. That the events of the narrative take place from within Farrell’s consciousness most certainly has the effect of positioning the reader in sympathetic alignment with Farrell. In making investments in the silences of the text, and in entering into Farrell’s consciousness, the reader forms an idea of Farrell’s unspeakable anguish. Inasmuch as the reader sees directly the spectacle of Farrell’s suffering, the reader is confronted with a moral dilemma, because in sympathising with the character, the reader is aligning himself or herself with an individual who has transgressed one of the most basic laws against social morality: incest. Moreover, the reader is sympathising with a character who has, the narrative implies, performed a heinous crime against his own sister and unborn child in a state of uncontrollable fury. This has implications for sympathy: we are forced by Carver’s techniques to sympathise with a character whose actions we cannot ethically condone. Much like Dostoevesky’s Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, we are forced to recognise Farrell’s humanity because Carver presents the narrative events from deep within the tormented consciousness of an individual, who, at the mercy of violent passions, has committed an egregious sin. Carver’s negations, in tandem with his stream-of-consciousness techniques, generate sympathy – the reader, in these silences, reproduces the emotions that take Farrell hostage, thereby, to recall Smith’s words, ’conceiving [himself or herself] enduring the same torments’ as a cognitively separate being.

In “Furious Seasons”, Carver foregrounds the anguish that Farrell feels, making the text more about the human psyche – an individual who is painfully and regretfully aware of his own debased humanity - than about the issues of abortion or incest.

“Why Don’t You Dance?”

“Why Don’t You Dance?”, like all of Carver’s narratives, resists resolution and is exemplary of V.S. Pritchett’s definition of a short story. The absences in this narrative are a crucial part of Carver’s authorial strategy to underscore the ephemeral nature of all chance encounters – the fact that often we are given only glimpses of the lives of others. As the reader is left to interpret the significance of the surface events of the narrative, so the girl of the narrative is left with the feeling that there is more to her chance encounter with a middle-aged man whose whole life, metaphorically speaking, is up for sale in his front yard. Carver places both the reader and the girl in the same situation of questioning: both are given only a glimpse of the protagonist’s life, which leads both to probe the surface events in order to gain an understanding of the underlying significance of the man’s actions. The reader is invited to examine closely the actions of the characters, which, in the absence of authorial commentary and interpretation, carry symbolic meanings. Carver builds Pritchett’s definition into the events of his narrative: because the girl’s and the boy’s encounter with the man occurs *in passing* – as they drive past his house – they can form only a partial, vague understanding of the story of the man’s life by reading into what they have seen of him. This explains the girl’s insistence on trying to ‘get it talked out’ (Carver, 2000: 130) – her insistence on trying to articulate the deeper significance of her encounter with a stranger whose personal, elided history is symbolically present in the miscellany of material artefacts that she has acquired. ‘After a time’, the narrator states, ‘she quit[s] trying’ (130). Although words ultimately elude the girl, she is intuitively cognizant of the significance of this encounter: she recognises in this

encounter transcendent meanings that have relevance for her own experience of life and love both now and in the future.

"Why Don't You Dance?" is furthermore an excellent example of the 'surrealistic' light in which Carver manages to present otherwise trivial and ordinary events. Because the narrative events take place outside the man's house, rather than inside it, they acquire an aspect of mystery and strangeness. Despite the commonplace nature of the events, they seem surrealistically removed and displaced from the context of ordinary life. An ordinary 'yard sale' becomes in "Why Don't You Dance?" an incisive examination of the protagonist's emotional displacement and disengagement from his own present context. The theme of displacement is established in the very first sentence of the narrative, 'In the kitchen, he poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard (125) [26]. This sentence conspires to cast the narrative events in an altogether surrealistic light: the physical displacement of the bedroom suite from its ordinary context strikes the reader as odd. The situation becomes even more surrealistic in the next few sentences, when the reader learns that the arrangement of the bedroom suite in the yard replicates its former arrangement inside the house:

> 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

[26] The phrase 'poured another drink' acts as a refrain throughout the narrative. In contrast to the boy, who gets drunk (and who tells both the man and the girl repeatedly that he is drunk), the man is presented as a 'seasoned' drinker - his drinking is compulsive but measured, his actions (apart from dropping his cigarette between the cushions of the sofa as he reaches to turn on the floor lamp), are always controlled and calm. The man's drinking is one of the most concrete signs of his state of detached despair: his use of alcohol is clearly a coping mechanism to phase out his plaintive regret about the impermanence of love. Never does the reader see the man on the verge of breakdown – he is always calmly detached. This is what makes a sense of his despair so much greater – he is completely out of touch with his own feelings, numbed by the effects of alcohol.

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. (125).

The impression that the man's relationship with his wife has disintegrated begins to sharpen in the reader's mind: the displacement of the furniture is representative of the protagonist's emotional disengagement. Moreover, things have become, in the man's mind, dangerously polarised with no space for alternate, potential meanings: the man is constantly reminded of the irreconcilable division between his and her sides of the story. The marital bed, like all of the furniture in the yard, is stripped of meaning because, as Daniel Lehman observes, there is no 'home to surround' it (Lehman, 1991: 48). This impression is given additional weight in the next paragraph when the narrator inventories the items of furniture and household appliances that the man has set up in the yard, and describes how they have been arranged. The man's 'desperate' (but cynically and ironically self-aware) attempt to recreate the life that he and his wife had lived inside the house is suggested by the fact that he has run an extension cord from the house out into the yard so that all the appliances are connected and can be operated, including the blender. The cupboards and rooms of the man's house have been emptied, the house divested (except for three cartons in the living room) of the paraphernalia that once signified a domestic union, and which now, displaced and standing in the yard, signify domestic disintegration. The 'memorabilia' of this domestic union are placed on show for a curious and ever watchful neighbourhood. By placing these objects on show, the man makes a caustic public announcement about the failure of his marriage - the yard becomes an auction site of not only second-hand goods, but also second-hand memories.

The subversive undercurrent of the narrative rises from the fact that the people who live in the houses across the street watch the man, the boy and the girl in bewildered

silence from behind the curtains of their own homes. The three characters in “Why Don’t You Dance?” become the object of neighbourhood fascination, stars in a kind of unedited suburban ‘reality television’ show, which the man stages in the wake of his separation from his wife and in the haze of his own alcohol-fuelled indifference. This indifference manifests itself in the man’s rather dry self-deprecation. He is able to appreciate, by viewing his situation from the perspective of his neighbours and miscellaneous passers-by, how bizarre the arrangement of his furniture in the yard must seem and, additionally, how strange he must seem to his neighbours. The protagonist of “Why Don’t You Dance?” is atypical of many of Carver’s characters because he, in contrast to Earl Ober and Bill Miller, for example, seems to have insight into his situation: he realises what he has lost. Although he seems cognizant of the wider significance of his failed marriage – the failure of such an abstract, metaphysical concept as love - and the implications that it will have for his own future, he projects an attitude of detached apathy. While standing in the kitchen and surveying the yard, he notices cars slow down and the people inside staring at what could be described a makeshift ‘set’ on the lawn. He observes, with ironic detachment, that he wouldn’t stop either (125). Despite the man’s seeming detachment, he is, by making an inventory of his furniture (which is all that remains of his broken marriage), trying to ‘find something that approach[es] a tangible expression of his existence’ (Skenazy: 80), trying to make sense of the disintegration of his marriage and, concomitantly, make sense of his existence.

Later in the narrative, the man says to the girl, who is conscious of the persistent stares of the neighbours as she and the man dance in the driveway, ‘They thought they’d seen everything over here. But they haven’t seen this, have they? (129). In this wry and telling remark, the man alludes to an undisclosed history of domestic volatility, which has, he implies, frequently been the subject of neighbourhood

speculation and voyeuristic intrigue. The reader probes beneath the surface of this otherwise casual remark, filling in the couple's history of domestic volatility.

The protagonist of this narrative is, however, as much a 'voyeur of his own life' and the boy's and the girl's, as the neighbours are of his. While in "Neighbors" the Millers recognise in the Stones a life that they have never had, the unnamed man in "Why Don't You Dance?" recognises in the girl and the boy a life he has had, but has now lost. In the refracted light of their idealistic love, he is reminded of the impermanence of love. Outwardly, he is extremely personable, a perfect host who makes his guests, by all accounts total strangers, feel most welcome. Inwardly, he is reaching out for a vicarious experience of love, his suggestion that the young couple dance in his driveway the most obvious sign of his desire to be reminded of the ardour of love [27].

He observes the girl and the boy closely, as if to catch a fleeting glimpse of a pristine love. The girl senses this at a subconscious level and intuits that the man has failed in love. She is unable, however, to explain the history of pain that she senses behind his actions. The man, throughout this encounter, reveals to the boy and girl nothing of his personal life. His 'history' is contained in the objects that stand in his front yard, which the girl and the boy see merely as things with which to furnish their apartment at a reduced price. After the girl and the boy have 'tested' the furniture and appliances (while the man is at the supermarket), and have decided to put in a bid to buy various items, the girl suggests that, 'Whatever they ask, offer ten dollars less … And besides, they must be *desperate* [my italics] or something' (127). The girl's cavalier words strike the reader as extremely ironic for the man *is* desperate, only not

[27] The man's act of giving the young couple his record player and his collection of records could be read as a sign of his own ambivalence about love. He recognises implicitly that the girl and the boy have an opportunity to create a lifetime of memories together, yet in giving them his records he is in effect giving away his own memories of love. Significantly, though, these items are a gift to the couple. The suggestion here is that a price cannot be ascribed to these memories – they cannot be de-valued by being sold for 'ten dollars less' than some arbitrary figure.

in the sense that the girl suspects. Brian Scobie remarks that the girl, in deciding on such a bargaining strategy, demonstrates a keen awareness of how she can 'make capital' (Scobie: 283) out of the man's desperate situation. Yet, this history no longer holds any currency for the man, which is suggested by the fact that he is completely unconcerned about how much money his things go for at the end of the day. He recognises at some level that the boy and the girl could possibly re-ascribe meaning to his bric-a-brac as they begin to set up home together. He therefore decides to accept whatever offer they make. At one point, the girl asks him how much money he wants for the desk and he 'waves his hand at this preposterous question' (128), realising that the young couple fail to understand that his yard sale is not about making fast money, but disposing of a past that is fraught with painful memories. After the 'selling price' of the bed, the T.V and the desk has been 'negotiated', he offers the boy and the girl a drink and sits down on the sofa. He leans back in the sofa and 'stares' at his guests, intrigued by their show of togetherness and the efficiency with which they conduct their 'business transactions': the girl decides what she wants, the boy totals up the cost and writes out a cheque to 'cash'. Later, he switches on the floor lamp that stands next to the television, as if to make it easier to study the couple. In the lamplight, he reflects that 'there was something about their faces. It was nice or it was nasty. There was no telling' (128). The man's cynicism about love is conveyed in these sentences – his inability to determine whether their idealistic love is 'nice or nasty'. Scobie observes that despite the man's understanding that the boy and the girl are about to set up house together, he is aware of their determination to 'pick through the leftovers of his marriage' (Scobie: 283) and that they are ruthless in their 'advance' (Scobie: 283) – their intent to exploit his 'desperation' to their own material advantage.

Despite the fact that the girl capitalizes on the man's situation, she is also sensitive, as Scobie further observes, to both the idealism of romance and its tragedy (Scobie:

283). A sense of her youthful idealism is conveyed in the description of her lying on the man's bed (before he returns from the market) and thinking that she can see a star in the sky. She encourages her boyfriend to try out the bed and asks him to kiss her. As the afternoon progresses, and once she has successfully 'bargained' for the furniture, she becomes more attuned to the tragedy of love and senses, beneath the man's calm exterior, a profound despair. The girl uses the word 'desperate' again towards the end of the narrative, but recognises this time that the man is not financially desperate, as she had thought earlier in the afternoon, but emotionally desperate. The girl, in her inebriated state (all three have been drinking most of the afternoon), intuits, but cannot articulate, the significance of the man's gesture of playing his records for them and his request that she and her boyfriend dance in his driveway. In an act of spirited spontaneity, once she has danced with the boy, she asks the man to dance. While she is dancing with the man, he asks her if she likes her new bed (129). The girl seems to intuit the significance of the bed at this point: she has a vague understanding that, for the man, the bed is a symbol of a love that has ended. Focusing on her actions, Carver conveys the girl's compassion for the man:

> The girl closed and opened her eyes. She pushed her face into the man's shoulder. She pulled the man closer.
>
> "You must be desperate or something," she said (130).

This is an excellent example of sympathetic exchange: the girl, who is a stand-in for the reader, places herself imaginatively in the man's situation and thereby is able to apprehend his emotional desperation. This understanding automatically translates into a physical gesture of compassion – she pulls the man closer. She is able to sympathise with the man because she has read into the silences behind his surface actions and words.

Carver exceeds his own criterion in this narrative: he invests the glimpses of this chance encounter between the man, and the boy and the girl with an extraordinary iconographic power. Otherwise clichéd and ordinary events, by virtue of their displacement from their usual context, become de-familiar and invested with symbolic meanings, which, in the absence of authorial interpretation and commentary, produce a play of meanings. Furthermore, this absence of authorial commentary on the characters actions, reactions and interactions forces the reader to add his or her own 'subjective elements'. The super-transparent realism of "Why Don't You Dance?" is negated as the reader searches actively for means by which to make sense of the man's silence and concretise the implied dimensions of the text – the man's hidden history and the girl and the boy's uncertain future.

Chapter Summary

The four narratives that have been discussed in this chapter reflect Carver's neo-realist interest in representing the lives of a socially, emotionally, and spiritually disenfranchised sub-section of middle and lower class suburbia. His critique of contemporary America converges around his depiction of ordinary lives in stasis, the fragmentation of identity, and the collective alienation of a populace that is at a loss to explain and counteract its own degeneracy. Carver takes his readers behind the closed doors of his characters' apartments, placing the reader in a situation where he or she is confronted with scenes of domestic dissolution and lives on the verge of collapse.

The realist inheritance of Carver's fiction is evident from his adherence to the three basic criteria of realist representation, as outlined by George J. Becker's essay in

Modern Language Quarterly[28]. The first is the extraordinary verisimilitude of his narratives, which, as discussed in this chapter, absorbs the reader into the minds of his characters. The second is his apparently 'objective', as opposed to 'subjective' or 'idealistic', representation of human behaviour and interactions. Carver's excision of an authorial viewpoint from his narratives facilitates his seemingly objective documentation of events – his aim to represent events in as 'factual' and non-emotive a manner as possible. The third is his attempt to 'approach the norm of experience' – his reliance upon the commonplace and the ordinary, rather than the 'exceptional' (Pizer, 1984: 1-2). Although Carver creates in his fiction the impression of a direct equivalence with the real world, this equivalence is subverted by his omissions. These omissions, as seen in the narratives discussed in this chapter, make the reader conscious of the author's mediating strategies, thereby destabilizing the transparent realism that he contrives, and moving his fiction in the direction of (post)modernism. Carver's omissions have a metonymic purpose: they are substitutions - narrative replacements - for the incommunicable, repressed desires of his characters. By making investments in these narrative omissions – by filling in the textual 'blanks', to use Iser's terminology – the reader realises the submerged landscapes of Carver's fiction. These omissions are a conduit to the psychological and emotional impulses of his characters, to their elided histories and implied futures. As the reader profiles the interiority of Carver's characters – imagines their sentiments and sensations – so he or she is moved into a position of sympathetic identification. Sympathy is therefore a function of the reader's investments in Carver's narrative omissions.

[28] This definition of realism is contained in Donald Pizer's *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature.* The differences between realism and postmodernism will be discussed more comprehensively in the conclusion of this study.

CHAPTER TWO: CARVER'S NEW AMERICA

Charting New Territory: Horizons of Hope in Carver's Later Fiction

The distinctive shift in the style and direction of Carver's fiction since the publication of *Cathedral* has been the subject of much critical work. Critiques that chronicle this shift have a tendency, however, to divide Carver's career rather too prematurely and too rigidly into two phases: 'minimalist' Carver and 'post-minimalist' Carver. Despite frequent reference to the 'minimalist aesthetic' of Carver's fiction, it would be erroneous to label him a 'minimalist' overall, for such a label misrepresents not only his later fiction, but also his very early fiction [29]. Adam Meyer, in "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Fiction", argues that if Carver's stories are read chronologically, a clearer idea of the overall shape that his career has taken can be ascertained. Meyer contends that Carver's career follows the pattern of an 'hour glass' figure rather than an 'inverted pyramid' (Meyer, 1989: 239). In other words, Carver neither started his career as a 'minimalist' nor ended his career as one. Indeed, "Furious Seasons" and "A Small, Good Thing", testify respectively to the non-minimalist tendencies of his very early and later fiction. What, then, distinguishes Carver's pre-*Cathedral* fiction from his later fiction? Although Carver continues to engage in his later fiction with the same social problems (alcoholism, divorce, financial desperation) that dominate his earlier narratives, most of the characters in his later narratives 'make decisions' (Carver in Alton: 10) about their lives. If Carver records the 'absence of power' (Alton: 10) in his earlier narratives, then in his later narratives he records the reclamation of power - a society where individuals, instead of being immobilised by their social and economic circumstances, reclaim agency, reclaim their lives and determine their own futures.

[29] "Furious Seasons", "The Hair", "The Aficionados", "Poseidon and Company" and "Bright Red Apples" are a few narratives that could be counted as examples of Carver's very early fiction.

The characters of Carver's later fiction are able to change their circumstances and this, in itself, is indicative of the paradigmatic shift from 'existential realism' to 'humanist realism', from the experience of individuals trying unsuccessfully to find salvation within a deterministic and meaningless universe to the experience of individuals within a world where social bonds are figured as humanizing structures. Carver states of the difference between his earlier and later stories that:

> …the situations in the earlier stories are different from that of many of the later stories. The characters in the later stories are not destitute or trapped or beaten up on by circumstances. It's a life that they may have asked for once, but simply don't want any longer. … The vision now, today, is, I suppose, more hopeful than it once was. But for the most part, things still don't work out for the characters in the stories. Things perish. Ideas and ideals and people's goals and visions – they perish. But sometimes, oftentimes, the people themselves don't perish. They have to pull up their socks and go on (Carver, in Alton: 10).

The shift in Carver's fiction lies in what Stull identifies as the more 'painterly', 'subjective' and 'expressive' qualities of his later fiction (Stull: 7-8). While "Furious Seasons" and "A Small, Good Thing" both display these qualities, they project completely different visions of the world. If "Furious Seasons" projects a vision of total despair and alienation - a world divested of meaning - then "A Small, Good Thing" inverts this vision and presents a couple who, even after the death of their son, find meaning and salvation in even the smallest acts of human kindness and understanding. Although the omissions in "Furious Seasons" are as prevalent as the omissions in the narratives that comprise *Will You Please Be Quiet Please?* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, it is representative of neither the

extreme economy of the short stories that comprise these two volumes, nor the optimism of *Cathedral* and *Elephant*.

In order to examine the shift from the extreme economy of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* to the comparative 'fullness' of *Cathedral* and *Elephant*, an outline of the 'minimalist aesthetic' that defines the former two collections will prove useful. Minimalism's reception in the 1980s was ambivalent, to say the least. Viewed by certain critics as a reaction against 'rhetorical inflation' (Skenazy: 81), minimalism offered 'an art of elimination' (Skenazy: 81) and a way of 'creating boundaries around private pain and public high-mindedness' (Skenazy: 81) [30]. Carver's own reaction against 'public (and literary) high-mindedness' is evident from his assertion in "On Writing" that all too often 'experimentation' and 'formal innovation' are 'a license to try to brutalize or alienate the reader' (Carver, 2000: 89). Contending that 'real experimentation in fiction is original' (Carver, 2000: 89), Carver voices his mistrust of writing that is 'imitative' and 'dishonest' and that 'carr[ies] no news of the world' (Carver 2000: 89). Such writing, in Carver's opinion, uses 'tricks' and 'gimmicks' to deceive the reader, but, in the end, manages to deceive only the writer. Yet, far from resisting the use of experimental techniques, minimalism has been accused, ironically, of employing its own 'tricks' and 'gimmicks' to 'alienate the reader', its ambiguous resolutions, leaving, as one critic put it, 'the reader holding the bag' (Meyer: 241). Critics who reject minimalism often see its radical economy of language as nothing more than a paucity of

[30] Certain critics view the tendency in what Robert Dunn calls 'private interest fiction' to depict 'the self in utter retreat' or to create 'boundaries around private pain' as exclusionary and, at the extreme end of the scale, even antithetical to the aims of literature. Their argument rests on the view that the characters in private interest fiction retreat so far into the interior reaches of their own private pain that the reader, in effect, learns nothing about anything (See Skenazy, "Life in Limbo: Ray Carver's Fiction': 79). Elliott Malamet proposes, in opposition to such a view, that the apparent 'withdrawal of Carver's characters [is] part of an authorial enterprise of considerable aesthetic sophistication and psychological depth, and cannot be adequately encompassed by employing such critical dichotomies as private versus public fiction or minimalism versus maximalism' (See Elliott Malamet, "Raymond Carver and the Fear of Narration": 60).

language. This paucity of language, it is argued, makes it impossible for the reader to engage with either the characters or the events of minimalist texts. Moreover, the omissions that minimalist writers deploy in their narratives produce such ambiguities of meaning that the reader left at a loss as to how to interpret the actual events. While readers of Carver's narratives are often required to provide the conclusions to his narratives, these conclusions are pre-structured by implications within the text. Although readers may need to decide between a range of possible readings of events, he or she is never left at a loss as to how to interpret them. Of his 'truncated narratives', Carver states, 'I want to make sure that my readers aren't left feeling cheated when they've finished my stories. It's important for writers to provide enough to satisfy readers, even if they don't provide '"the" answers, or clear resolution' (Carver quoted by Adam Meyer: 249). John Barth states that one of the principle tenets of the minimalist aesthetic is the 'radical economy of artistic means' whereby 'artistic effect may be enhanced … even where such parsimony compromises other values: completeness, for example, or richness or precision of statement' (Barth quoted by Meyer: 249). While Carver could, plausibly, in certain camps be accused of sacrificing narrative 'completeness' and 'richness' for the sake of 'artistic effect' (although I would argue against such a view), he most certainly cannot be accused of '[im]precision of statement'. Precision of statement is, to Carver's mind, an important virtue of writing and is one of the reasons that he has emphasised the value of re-writing and revision. In "On Writing", Carver cites, as one of five dictums for good writing, Ezra Pound's assertion that 'fundamental accuracy of statement is the ONE sole morality of writing' (Carver, 2000: 80). In citing this dictum, Carver proclaims one of his most important aesthetic convictions – a precise language that engages the reader's 'artistic sense'.

If minimalism can be faulted for alienating readers by presenting only the contours of human experience, a far more virulent indictment comes from Bharati Mukherjee,

who has railed vehemently against minimalism's 'dangerous social agenda' (Mukherjee, quoted by Skenazy: 81). Mukherjee views minimalism as a subversive enclave accessible only to an initiated few and attacks it for being a politicised mode of storytelling 'designed to keep out anyone with too much story to tell' (Mukherjee, quoted by Skenazy: 81). Yet, Carver's 'minimalism' is concerned less with a politics of exclusion than with an aesthetics of reduction, a way of storytelling that reflects, as Skenazy observes, 'the dearth of alternatives' (Skenazy, 81) open to his characters. While Skenazy, like many critics, sees in the economy of Carver's language the broad themes of 'social, emotional and cultural deprivation' (Skenazy: 80) that define Carver's America, he nevertheless maintains that Carver sometimes leaves out so much in his pre-*Cathedral* fiction that the reader is unable to 'invade the events' (Skenazy: 81) of his stories. Carver can be defended against such a claim. Even though many of his early narratives are characterised by a sense of absence, this seldom compromises his representation of the emotional and psychological crises that conflict his characters, or the perceptiveness with which he records these crises. Carver's precise language makes it possible for the reader to invade the events of the narrative because it provides clear parameters within which to construct, as Iser states, the 'implicit but unformulated causes' of his characters' predicaments.

Of interest to this chapter is the extent to which the reader is better able to 'invade the events' of Carver's later narratives. Yet, if Carver's omissions are less prevalent in his later fiction, how does this affect the reader's emotional and intellectual involvement? Does this mean that the reader is required to make fewer investments in the glimpses of individual lives that Carver provides? Furthermore, if Carver's later work is generally more optimistic, does this mean that we sympathise less with the characters? What are, in addition, the implications of this new expansiveness for the designation of Carver's fiction within either a postmodernist or realist school of writing?

Chapter Overview

"The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing" will be critiqued comparatively because, as mentioned previously, the latter is the revised version of the former. This comparison will focus on the stylistic and paradigmatic shifts that have occurred over the course of Carver's career. When read against "A Small, Good Thing", the economy of "The Bath" becomes glaringly apparent. While "A Small, Good Thing" is the revised version of "The Bath", the additions and amendments that Carver makes to the "A Small, Good Thing" alter its substantive content so greatly that the two narratives become altogether different stories, rather than simply different versions of each other. That both narratives contain the same characters and are developed around the same critical incident – a hit-and-run accident in which the victim is an eight-year-old boy – justifies such an approach. "Where I'm Calling From", one of the new stories that Carver included in his collection of the same title, will be compared with "Careful", a narrative first printed in *Cathedral*. When read as companion pieces, the shift from despair to hope in Carver's fiction becomes plainly clear. While Carver presents in "Careful" a portrait of an individual sinking into a pattern of alcohol abuse, in "Where I'm Calling From" he presents a portrait of an individual trying to beat his alcoholism.

"The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing"

Revision has always played a crucial role in Carver's approach to writing. Over the course of his career, he has revised several stories, often changing the titles of his revised stories to denote important shifts in emphasis and meaning. Of rewriting Carver has said that:

> I like to mess around with my stories. I'd rather tinker with a story after writing it, and then tinker some more, changing this, changing that, than have to write the story in the first place. … Maybe I revise because it gradually takes me into the heart of what the story is *about*. I have to keep trying to see if I can find that out. It's a process more than a fixed position (Carver, 2000: 182-183).

If rewriting is a process that takes Carver gradually into 'what the story is *about*', it stands to reason that a study of these revisions can take the reader into the heart of what his stories are about.

While "The Bath" exemplifies Carver's mastery of the 'short short story' form and is wholly Spartan in its delineation of character, action and setting, "A Small, Good Thing" is an excellent example of Carver's later appropriation of the more 'elastic territory' (Carver, 2000: 231) of the longer short story form and his more generous and open approach to story telling. This generosity is seen mainly in the development of scenes between different characters in order to show nuances in human interaction, thus establishing Carver's humanist concerns – his interest in writing in a far more 'subjective' manner that expresses more visibly his concern for his characters. In addition, characters - even minor ones such as the doctor - are described in much more detail and seem more rounded. Secondary lines of action are also developed and extend the scope and reach of the narrative - the narrative is, in the final analysis, as much about the baker's experience as it is about the Weisses'. These revisions, in addition to changing the overall mood and thematic thrust of "The Bath", make the reader respond differently to the characters. This is especially true of the baker, a character who is delineated in far more detail and with whom the reader, at the end, sympathises. While in "The Bath", the reader sees both Mr and Mrs Weiss trying to cope each on their own with the fear of losing their son, in

“A Small, good Thing”, Carver, as Stull observes, ‘expands the parents’ sympathies for one another’ (Stull: 9). Jon Powell, similarly, contends that the ‘characters search for and find other characters with whom they have something in common’ (Powell: 652). Carver presents in “A Small, Good Thing” the power of sympathy to unite individuals in recognition of a common humanity and coveys a sense of each character’s position within a wider social context and community. The sense of a wider community in Carver’s later fiction bestows on his texts a wider berth of socio-political meaning, indicating that Carver possibly came to agree with his more stringent critics who found his fiction too localized to engage effectively with the realities of a cross-section of American society.

The most obvious difference between the two narratives is, of course, their respective titles. This immediately indicates a shift in focus. In “The Bath”, both Mr and Mrs Weiss go home, each on separate occasions, to have a bath. The act of bathing becomes a sign of the couple’s attempt to recover a sense of routine and normality in their lives - a conscious decision to take care of themselves for their son, Scotty, who, after being struck down by a car on his eighth birthday, is lying comatose in hospital. The parents’ state of uncertainty is, on one level, the subject of the narrative. However, the narrative investigates, on another, deeper level, the miscommunications that can alienate individuals from each other. These miscommunications are resolved in “A Small, Good Thing” (when Mrs Weiss confronts the baker) and the narrative thereby shifts its focus onto acts of communication and communion that have the power to bring individuals closer together in a spirit of compassion and pity. In “The Bath”, when Mrs Weiss returns home from the hospital to take a bath, she receives a telephone call about ‘Scotty’. The identity of the caller remains a mystery, forcing the reader to guess whether the caller is one of two possible individuals: the doctor at the hospital or the baker from whom Mrs Weiss, at the beginning of the narrative, orders a birthday cake, but which,

since Scotty's accident, she has forgotten to collect. The absence of definitive answers in "The Bath" is one of Carver's main narrative strategies to engage the reader – to make him or her formulate answers to these ambiguities. Clues within the text indicate, however, that it is the baker calling to demand that the cake be collected and that he be recompensed for it. This is because the baker has already telephoned the house, only to have the telephone put down on him by an angry Mr Weiss, who has just returned home from the hospital – also to take a bath - and who explains that he knows nothing about a cake. Daniel Lehman makes an important observation about the baker's calls to the house: the baker's 'cryptic' calls prevent both Mr and Mrs Weiss from taking a bath, thereby denying the couple the 'ritual healing that they most need' (Lehman: 52). Moreover, the baker's calls to the Weiss house, at a time of immense emotional strain in their lives, generates a sense of menace in the story, the continual miscommunication between the baker and the Weiss couple a sign of the erosion of human synergy.

The first paragraph of "The Bath" establishes two important issues in the text that are inverted in "A Small, Good Thing". The first of these is Mrs Weiss's impression that the baker is an unfriendly man who is not prepared to engage in 'pleasantries' (48). A sense of his cold demeanour is conveyed by his minimal conversation – he gives Mrs Weiss only 'the barest information, nothing that [is] not necessary' (48) [31]. This description charts the course for the baker's aggressive telephone call later in the story, an event that moves the reader into a position of sympathy with the Weisses, given the irrelevance of the cake in view of the boy's condition. This brief description of the baker is, apart from his telephone call to Mr Weiss, the only glimpse of the baker that the reader is given. Conversely, in "A Small, Good Thing" Carver includes a scene (which takes place at the back of the baker's shop) that reverses the

[31] Carver announces implicitly his 'minimalist' aesthetic in these words – he provides the reader with only the 'barest information', forcing the reader to shade in the substantive content and meanings of his narratives.

reader's and the Weisses' negative impression of the baker and reinforces the narrative's themes of sympathy, forgiveness and redemption. The baker's lonely existence is elided in "The Bath", forcing the reader's sympathies to weigh heavily on the side of the Weisses. In "A Small Good, Thing", however, the baker, once he learns that the Weisses' son has died (Scotty's prognosis remains open-ended in "The Bath"), apologises for his threatening telephone calls, for harassing the Weisses, and makes a simple, but extremely symbolic gesture of compassion toward them – he offers the couple warm bread rolls, insisting that 'eating is a small, good thing in a time like this' (332). The act of 'breaking bread' reverses the pattern of miscommunication that prevails in "The Bath" as the characters sit down to talk and resolve their feelings of anger and hostility.

The second issue that is established in the first paragraph is the idea of 'dehumanisation', a theme that Jon Powell picks up in both "The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing". Mrs Weiss chooses a birthday cake and decides to have the name 'Scotty' iced on the cake as if it is the name of the spaceship on the cake (Powell notes that in "A Small, Good Thing", 'Scotty is twice removed, first to the cake, then to the spaceship on the cake' (651)). The incidence of there being a cake called 'Scotty', and an actual boy named Scotty, causes the miscommunication between the baker and the Weisses. In "The Bath", the cake becomes for the reader a reminder of Scotty's critical condition, and a sign of the baker's dehumanisation of the boy Scotty: his 'trivial' concern about the cake 'Scotty' (or rather the money that he has not been paid) contrasts sharply with the Weisses warranted concern about their son. In "A Small, Good Thing", the baker recognises the pain that he has caused Ann and Howard Weiss and asks them to forgive him. The baker, although he has no children of his own, tries to imagine what the Weisses are feeling and thereby regains his lost humanity - he is given an idea of how to act compassionately towards others. Sympathy for the baker is aroused when he admits his own de-humanisation:

> 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've forgotten, I don't know for sure. But I'm not any longer, if I ever was. Now I'm just a baker. That don't excuse my doing what I did, I know. But I'm deeply sorry … Forgive me, if you can … 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 (331).

Sympathy is structured as an exchange in this scene: as the baker tries to imagine what the Weisses are feeling, so Ann Weiss's rage and hatred of the baker subsides as she begins to understand his loneliness. The baker and Anne Weiss are each reminded of their humanity as they begin to identify with each other and come to see, through each other, a reflection of their own limitations and faults as human beings.

While this exchange of sympathy is probably the single most significant addition to "A Small, Good Thing", other examples of sympathy abound in the narrative. In opposition to "The Bath", which focuses on the parents' existential anguish and uncertainty, both Mr and Mrs Weiss isolated in their own fear, "A Small, Good Thing" presents a series of small exchanges of sympathy between separate individuals. One such example is the different light in which the Negro couple is presented in the revised narrative. In both narratives, Mrs Weiss first encounters the couple in one of the ward's waiting rooms. Upon entering the room, she is mistaken for a nurse by the Negro woman whose son is in hospital. Mrs Weiss tells the Negro man that she is looking for the elevator, but before leaving the room, she begins to explain what has happened to her son. Mrs Weiss, recognising that the couple are in the same dreadful situation of waiting that she and her husband are in, attempts to alleviate her own anxieties by talking to the couple. She explains that Scotty was in an accident, that he is in 'some kind of coma' and that she is going home to take a bath. She

introduces herself as ‘Ann Weiss’. This is the only introduction that is made - the couple are unresponsive and, although the man shifts in his chair and shakes his head, which is a non-verbal indication of his understanding of Mrs Weiss’s anguish, the only words he speaks to Mrs Weiss are ‘Our Nelson’ – presumably his son’s name. Anne Weiss’s desire to talk to the couple is made far more apparent, however, in “A Small, Good Thing”. She studies the woman whose head is bowed, whose eyes are closed and whose lips are moving silently, wishing that she could hear the words that the woman is speaking – words that may well be a prayer for the Negro woman’s son. The man in “A Small, Good Thing” is far less taciturn. He tells Ann Weiss that his son, Franklin, has, been seriously cut in a fight that occurred at a party and that he is in surgery. Like Scotty, Franklin is an innocent victim of a potentially fatal incident. A sense of a wider social context is conveyed in this brief interlude between Ann Weiss and the man. The couple’s race and social status in “A Small, Good Thing” is stated directly, and is thereby given more emphasis than it is in “The Bath”. The reader is given the impression that the couple are not of the same social class as the Weisses: Ann notices immediately that the couple’s teenage daughter is ‘stretched out’ on one of the chairs and that she is smoking a cigarette. She also notices that the woman is wearing a housedress and slippers and that the coffee table is littered with hamburger wrappers and Styrofoam coffee cups. The incidence of the boy being stabbed at a party also suggests that the Negro family live in a ‘rough’ neighbourhood. These differences in class and race are erased, however, by the fear that unites Ann Weiss and the Negro couple. Ann is able to identify with the couple because she, like the man and the woman, is a parent and fears losing her son. Ann’s identification with, and concern for, the couple is seen again later in the narrative when she inquires about Franklin’s condition. She learns that he has died. Franklin’s death foreshadows Scotty’s death and the narrative moves immediately into a scene in which the doctor informs Ann and Howard Weiss that Scotty will need to go into surgery so that it can be determined why he will not wake up.

While “The Bath” resists resolution and thereby prolongs the narrative’s thrust of existential uncertainty, placing both the reader and the parents in the same position of fearful uncertainty, “A Small, Good Thing” resolves these uncertainties. This difference has implications both for the way in which we interpret each of the narratives and for the way in which sympathy is structured. Stull argues that the existential thrust of “The Bath” is realised through two uncertainties in the narrative. The first of these is the fact that neither the doctor nor the parents know, for certain, whether Scotty is simply in ‘shock’ or whether his condition is potentially fatal. The second of these is that neither the reader, nor Ann Weiss, knows, for certain, who the caller is at the end of the narrative. In “A Small, Good Thing”, however, Scotty not only dies, but the reason for his death is given (a ‘hidden occlusion’, which, if Scotty had been operated on sooner, could have been detected). In addition to providing the reader with such information, Carver includes the actual moment when Scotty’s parents see him take his ‘last breath’. This scene is tailored to elicit sympathy in the reader. Carver includes an image of an anguished Ann and Howard Weiss reassuring their son that they are there to comfort him. The child, however, fails to recognise them and then ‘howl[s] until he [has] no more air in his lungs’ before his face ‘relax[es’] and ‘soften[s]’ and he parts his lips and takes his last breath which is ‘exhaled gently through the clenched teeth’ (325). Carver excises the parents’ immediate reaction to their son’s death and focuses rather on the couple’s devastated disbelief as the doctor explains the reason for Scotty’s death and then escorts them to the front door of the hospital. The interaction between the Weisses and the doctor is central to the narrative’s theme of sympathetic exchange. While in the “Bath”, images of the Weisses in frieze-like isolation underscore the deficit of exchanges of sympathy and communion in an uncaring world, in “A Small, Good Thing”, the doctor’s words and act of embracing Mrs Weiss constitute a verbal and gestural form of sympathy.

Mrs Weiss feels that she cannot leave the hospital and this poignantly inverts her fantasy earlier in the narrative that she is leaving the hospital as the woman whom she sees getting into a car in the parking lot and that 'somebody, anybody, [is] driving her away from here to somewhere else' (317):

> She gazed out into the parking lot and then turned around and looked back at the front of the hospital. She began shaking her head. "No, no," she said. "I can't leave him here, no." She heard herself say that and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sort of words used on TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths. She wanted the words to be her own (326).

A sense of Mrs Weiss's profound shock and disbelief is conveyed in these lines - words failing her, she can rely only on the clichés used on television shows to communicate her feelings. Mrs Weiss's disengagement – the fact that she hears herself speaking words that are not her own – further imparts a sense of her profound shock and disbelief. The narrative from this point on presents images of the Weiss parents trying to cope with the loss of their son – their gradual realisation and acceptance of the fact that their son is gone. Carver's delineation of the parents' grief is orchestrated to evoke sympathy in the reader: he represents both Mr and Mrs Weiss's emotions far more directly and expansively. Although the reader is required to make fewer investments, compassion for the Weisses is stirred by Carver's subtle representation of the gamut of emotions (disbelief, bereavement, anger) that overwhelm the Weisses as they begin a process of mourning, which leads eventually to a process of healing. While in "The Bath" each of the parents is isolated in their fear, in "A Small, Good Thing" Carver presents a couple joined by their common grief and foregrounds their attempts to console each other. This is how, as Stull observes, Carver 'expands the parents' sympathies for one another' (Stull: 9). Kathleen Shute,

speaking of the crisis around life and death presented in each of the narratives, contends that in “The Bath” the parents can ‘manage little beyond a mute, uncomprehending horror’ (Powell: 652) when confronted with the prospect of their son’s death. In a “Small, Good Thing”, however, as Shute argues, Carver’s ‘paradigm of hopeless resignation is abandoned as [he] not only confronts death … but goes on to record the life after, the agony and resulting growth of those who survive (Powell: 652). The Weisses, rather than being caught in existential limbo, unable to communicate their fears either to each other or to the medical staff at the hospital, begin to ‘own’ their fear, their anguish, and their sense of the unfairness of their circumstances. This enables the couple to claim control over their situation, to face their problems and thus move on with their lives. Mrs Weiss decides to confront the baker when she realises that he has been making the obsessive, late-night calls to their house (Mrs Weiss initially presumes that the calls have been made by the hit-and-run driver). This assertiveness (even if driven by rage) contrasts sharply with the paralysing fear of the parents in “The Bath”. This confrontation with the baker is the catalyst that enables Mrs Weiss to confront the reality of her son’s death:

> “My son’s dead,” she said with a cold, even finality. He was hit by a car Monday morning. We’ve been waiting with him until he died. But, of course, you couldn’t be expected to know that, could you? Bakers can’t know everything – can they, Mr Baker? But he’s dead. He’s dead, you bastard!” Just as suddenly as it had welled in her, the anger dwindled, gave way to something else, a dizzy feeling of nausea. She leaned against the table that was sprinkled with flour, put her hands over her face, and began to cry, her shoulders rocking back and forth. “It isn’t fair,” she said. “It isn’t, isn’t fair” (330).

This speech ‘abolishes the suspicions and errors that brought them to the point of confrontation’ (Facknitz, 1986: 292) and enables real communication and communion to take place, which, in turn, further facilitates the process of healing.

Conclusive statements about which of the two narratives generates more (or less) sympathy in the reader would be to discount the differences between individual readers: different readers will, inevitably, respond differently to each of these narratives. Such statements would, in any case, be irrelevant and beside the point, for the point in question is how sympathy is generated in each of the respective narratives and not how much is generated. As stated previously, rather than simply being different versions of each other, these stories are, when read comparatively, altogether different stories. Carver manages his subject matter differently in each of these narratives and this affects the way in which sympathy operates in each narrative. Sympathy for the Weiss couple in “The Bath” turns on Carver’s representation of existential uncertainty, the narrative’s absence of closure refuses to grant both the couple and the reader cathartic closure to the crisis around life and death and enables the reader to experience in some measure the Weisses sensations of fearful angst and uncertainty. The reader, in making investments in the narrative omissions, imaginatively realises the Weisses’ suffering. “A Small, Good Thing”, however, resolves the existential uncertainty of “The Bath” – Scotty dies and the reason for his death is given. While the reader is required to make fewer investments in this narrative, Carver demonstrates the processes of sympathetic exchange between his characters and thereby provides a concrete model of sympathy – the power of communication to foster mutual understanding - that supports his humanist aims.

“Careful” and “Where I’m Calling From”

If Carver represents in his pre-*Cathedral* fiction a world populated by ‘alcoholics, obsessives, drifters and other losers … thoroughly thrashed by life in the first round’ (Facknitz: 287), then his post-*Cathedral* fiction is populated by individuals who are able to see on the horizon of their present despair a second opportunity to reclaim life.

The motif of alcoholism recurs in Carver’s fiction and is often the most trenchant sign of the effects of failure and despair on the behaviour of many of Carver’s characters. These individuals, believing that they have nothing left to lose, lose themselves and their lives to alcohol, drinking compulsively and excessively to anaesthetise their pain and to forget their failures. A ‘practising alcoholic’ (Carver in Alton: 21) for close to a decade, Carver writes about alcoholism with the understanding of one who has experienced ‘a full measure of suffering’ (Carver in Alton: 21), and who understands all too well the impulses that drive the alcoholic. Compassion for the characters of Carver’s fiction who are ‘practicing alcoholics’ is generated because Carver focuses on their acute emotional and physical suffering as they battle with their disease.

Seldom do these individuals admit to their alcoholism, and therefore they surrender to what Peter Donahue calls the ‘machinations’ and illusory ‘truth effects’ of the ‘ideology of alcoholism’ (Donahue: 1991: 48). Donahue informs his discussion of alcoholism in Carver with the language and theory of Alcoholics Anonymous and shows how the alcoholic’s subjectivity becomes inscribed within the ‘dominant, repressive process of alcohol signifying’ (Donahue: 55). Because the ‘imperative alcohol sign … represses all other signifiers’, alcohol is the only signifier that has meaning for the alcoholic. This explains why addiction is so difficult to overcome –

the addict's identity is inscribed within the pattern of drug or alcohol abuse into which he or she has fallen.

The self-destructive addiction of the alcoholic is rendered with incisive and hard-hitting force in "Careful", a narrative first published in *Cathedral*, but atypical of the trajectory of hope that defines this volume. Published as a companion piece to "Where I'm Calling From", the transfiguration of despair into hope in Carver's fiction becomes even more apparent when these two narratives are read in succession. In "Careful", the protagonist, Lloyd, having separated recently from his wife, Inez, isolates himself inside his rented apartment (he rarely ventures outside and he has no telephone). This is, as Donahue points out, 'the worst situation a suffering alcoholic can put himself into' (Donahue: 59) because by 'cut[ting] himself off from the world, he [has] severely limi[ted] the likelihood for opening a dialogue to counter the repressive denial of the disease' (Donahue: 59). Finding himself alone in a small, sparsely furnished apartment, which, like the empty house in "Why, Don't You Dance?", is void of the symbolic significance of 'home' (he leaves the television on all day and night because he does not have to pay the electricity bill and because he sees the apartment as nothing more than rented, meaningless space), the protagonist falls hopelessly into a pattern of alcohol abuse, in spite of his somewhat ludicrous decision, when he moves into the apartment, to limit himself to champagne only. The protagonist's decision to drink champagne could be read as an almost ironic toast to his failed marriage and to his new found 'independence' – Lloyd believes that 'being alone [is] the thing he need[s] most' (Carver, 1995: 216) as this will give him a chance to do something about his drinking. He fails to keep his drinking in check and begins to drink three or four bottles of champagne a day.

Carver aligns the reader with the character by presenting the narrative from the perspective of the protagonist. The reader's access to the protagonist's

consciousness (via the narrator) facilitates the activation of sympathy because the reader 'bears witness' to Lloyd's abject despair and loneliness. Sympathy is structured differently in this narrative: while Carver manoeuvres the reader into a position of sympathetic identification with the protagonists of "They're Not Your Husband", "Neighbors" and "Why Don't You Dance?" by eliding their emotions, in "Careful", he presents his protagonist's emotions far more directly. Carver thrusts the reader into Lloyd's mind, thereby forcing the reader to see the world from Lloyd's perspective. By doing so, Carver gives his readers insight into the impaired thinking of the alcoholic and shows the destructive power of the disease. The reader's sympathy for the protagonist is acute because he or she sees an individual losing all perspective of what constitutes 'ordinary' behaviour, and who is at the complete mercy of his addiction. One morning, he 'falls' (216) to eating crumb doughnuts and drinking champagne. His reflects that:

> There'd been a time, some years back, when he would have laughed at having a breakfast like this. Now, there didn't seem to be anything very unusual about it ... Time was when he would have considered this a mildly crazy thing to do, something to tell his friends about. Then, the more he thought about it, the more he could see it didn't matter one way or the other (216).

As the narrative progresses, so Lloyd's ability to rationalise and justify his 'crazy' drinking habits becomes easier: dependent on alcohol and isolated in his apartment, he sees no point in regulating his behaviour to conform to even the most basic benchmarks of 'normality'. At the end of the narrative, he reaches a new low and resorts to drinking champagne out of the bottle. Holding the bottle by the neck, he reflects, that it 'didn't seem that much out of the ordinary' (226). Because Lloyd's subjectivity is inscribed within the 'ideology of alcoholism', he is unable to

differentiate between what constitutes normal and abnormal behaviour. (Donahue: 61).

The protagonist's dissociation from reality is seen not only in his obsessive drinking, but also in his irrational fear of going to bed and waking to discover that again he cannot hear:

> … he began to feel afraid of the night that was coming. He began to fear the moment he would begin to make his preparations for bed and what might happen afterward. That time was hours away, but already he was afraid. What if, in the middle of the night, he accidentally turned onto his right side, and the weight of his head pressing into the pillow were to seal the wax again into the dark canals of his ear? What if he woke up then, unable to hear, the ceiling inches from his head? (224).

Lloyd's inability to hear, or rather his reaction to being further isolated by his inability to hear, is a vehicle through which Carver charts Lloyd's emotional despair, increasing anxiety, and dissociation from reality. Before Inez arrives – unexpectedly - to visit him one morning, an unkempt Lloyd sits on the couch, violently punching the side of his own head in an effort to loosen the wax inside his ear. 'Beaten up by circumstances', Lloyd begins, quite literally, to beat himself. The line, 'he couldn't hear anything, and he seemed to have lost his sense of balance, his equilibrium …' (217) resonates with the reader because his behaviour is, by most standards, unhinged, unbalanced. If "The Bath" is about the miscommunications between individuals, which have the potential to be resolved (as they are in "A Small, Good Thing"), then "Careful" is about an irreparable and irrevocable breakdown of communication between individuals. Conversation between Lloyd and his wife is trivial – they talk about 'Q-tips', 'Wesson Oil', the intricate design of the ear,

everything except their relationship. As Inez begins to administer oil to his ear and says something about having no 'hairpins', Lloyd reflects that:

> … it was as if she were saying the words from another room. In a way, it was almost as if he'd imagined her saying them. There'd been a time, long ago, when they used to feel they had ESP when it came to what the other one was thinking. They could finish sentences that the other had started (219).

The distance between the couple is conveyed by Lloyd's inability to communicate with his wife. When Inez goes to the bathroom he:

> begins thinking of the things he ought to say to her. He wanted to tell her he was limiting himself to champagne and champagne only. He wanted to tell her he was tapering off the champagne, too. It was only a matter of time now. But when she came back into the room, he couldn't say anything. He didn't know where to start. But she didn't look at him anyway (220).

Carver captures in these words the pathos and tragedy of Lloyd's situation. The reader understands that Lloyd's desire to regain his wife's respect and love will probably never be fulfilled. This is because Lloyd is, first of all, deluded in thinking that he is managing to control his drinking (this is his alcoholism talking), and, secondly, and more to the point, Inez feels nothing for him – she does not even look at him.

The reader, even if Lloyd thinks that he can convince his wife that he has cut back on his drinking[32], knows otherwise. At the first opportunity (Inez leaves the apartment for a short while to speak to his landlady), he goes into the bathroom and takes a 'long drink' from the bottle of champagne that he had hidden behind the toilet. Lloyd fails to see the level of desperation to which he has been reduced. The reader's sympathy for Lloyd stands in contrast to his wife's evident lack of sympathy. When he tries to persuade her to stay with him, given his 'nightmare' situation – the fact that he might wake up to find that he is deaf - declines and states tersely, taciturnly, that she is 'late for something' (224). Ironically, when she does try to engage Lloyd in serious conversation as she stands at the door ready to leave, Lloyd, able to hear now, does not listen to what she is saying to him. Carver omits Inez's words, forcing the reader to be absorbed into Inez's mind – to imagine and sympathize with her perspective of the couple's elided, and presumably troubled, marital history. That these words are omitted also underscores Lloyd's denial of his drinking - his refusal to engage in serious dialogue and to confront the full extent of what he has lost to his addiction – his wife, his home and his sense of pride.

If Carver represents in "Careful" an individual whose subjectivity is, as Donahue puts it, 'perfectly inscribed [within] a fiercely repressive ideology [of alcoholism]' (61), then in "Where I'm Calling From" he represents an individual attempting to redefine his identity by deconstructing the ideology of alcoholism. Carver inverts the experience of the protagonists in each of these narratives. In "Careful", the protagonist falls further and further into a pattern of alcohol abuse: he redefines his own conception of normality in order to accommodate and rationalise his alcoholism, continually denying that he is an alcoholic. In "Where I'm Calling From", however, the residents

[32] Inez tells him later that she has seen his 'stash', but he, not hearing what she has actually said, tells her that he is 'trying to cut back' (222). This further shows the breakdown of communication between the couple, and, more importantly, Lloyd's refusal to confront his alcoholism.

at Frank Martin's 'drying out clinic' are trying to overcome the pattern of abuse that has had such a deleterious impact on their lives. While Lloyd withdraws from society and refuses to engage in forms of dialogue that will force him to confront his alcoholism and possibly give him the determination and perspective to escape its stranglehold, the in-patients at Frank Martin's rehabilitation centre depend on dialogue in order to confront their alcoholism – to see in others a reflection of their own debilitation and potential rehabilitation. Scenes of communal life at Frank Martin's abound in the narrative [33]. Such interactions, in addition to affording the narrator a chance to chart the stages of his own recovery in relation to that of others[34], show the spirit of camaraderie that exists between the in-patients. This is one of the key ways in which Carver projects a more hopeful view of the world: the characters, rather than being fixated on and overwhelmed by their own problems, retreating further into their own private consciousnesses, are interested in the stories of others. Listening to these stories enables the in-patients to gain new perspectives on their own situation and problems and thereby begin to redefine the way in which they see themselves, see others and see the world. Moreover, they seem able to give more of themselves to others in terms of support and friendship, and, in the case of Tiny (before his seizure) and the unnamed man who travels, are even able to laugh at their situation[35]. This narrative, like "A Small, Good Thing", demonstrates the power of communication and communion to heal the human spirit and therefore is

[33] The men relate stories about their lives at the breakfast table, which contrasts sharply with Lloyd's denial of his alcoholism in 'Careful'; the narrator and J.P. sit on the porch and converse every morning and evening (Frank Martin joins them on the porch one morning and recommends the fiction of Jack London, who, like the men (and like Carver), fought his own battle with alcoholism); and on New Year's Eve, the men congregate in the dining room and celebrate the New Year by eating a cake that Frank Martin has bought especially for the occasion.

[34] He takes cognisance of the physical and emotional states of Tiny and J.P. On New Year's Eve, he notices that J.P.'s shakes have, as he assured him they would, ceased. He notices his own appetite returning, as Tiny, after his seizure, loses his.

[35] The man who travels, when Frank Martin brings the cake, on which the words 'HAPPY NEW YEAR – ONE DAY AT A TIME' have been iced, into the dining room, jokingly exclaims that he doesn't want any cake and asks, 'Where's the champagne?' (238). On another occasion, he insists, with irony, that it is better drinking whiskey neat than on the rocks because it is the ice that makes the individual drunk and not, as commonly thought, the alcohol.

exemplary of Carver's humanist realism. "Where I'm Calling From" qualifies as an example of Carver's humanist realism not only in terms of its concern for the welfare of its subjects, but also because of its more generous delineation of events and characters. The narrative provides, in comparison with Carver's pre-*Cathedral* fiction, far more information about its central characters. Rather than excising the history of events that led the characters to their present situation, Carver includes glimpses of these events in order to give the reader a firmer idea of the characters' relationships with the women whom they have loved and abused and how they themselves have, as individuals, changed and developed. In addition, a sense of the world that exists outside of the insular parameters of the rehabilitation centre is given. Frank Martin refers to the fiction of Jack London [36], pointing out the distant valley in which London used to live, and the man who travels makes passing references to Europe and Egypt. These references have significance for the patients at the clinic: they are forced to see beyond the narrow limits of their disease and are encouraged to imagine new worlds of meaning. Claudine Verley points out, however, that the narrative could, if 'we remain on the surface of things' (Verley: 1989: 91), still be representative of the 'minimalist aesthetic' of Carver's fiction because, if we fail to appreciate the significance of the actual *mode of narration* that Carver exploits, we are simply 'plunged into a melodrama of alcoholism and conjugal life' (91). Verley argues that "Where I'm Calling From" is 'as bare of actual events as many other of Carver's works' and that 'only by making an implicit comparison between J.P. and the narrator can such a narrative … form any consistent unity' (Verley: 91). Verley's opinion that the narrative is 'as bare of events as many of Carver's other works' is

[36] As J.P. and the narrator look at 'the hills across the valley' where, Frank Martin informs them, Jack London used to live, they have, Donahue observes 'not only a wide perspective of the landscape before them, but also imaginative horizons – landscapes "behind the green hill [they're] looking at" – as well as the implied narrative wealth of London's work' (Donahue: 59). The inter-textual reference to the fiction of Jack London should not be overlooked: Carver seems to proclaim in "Where I'm Calling From", which is far more 'realist' in style and structure than "Neighbors" or "Why Don't You Dance?", an allegiance to the tradition of realism and naturalism in American letters.

debatable. While not much happens in the present context of the characters' lives, J.P.'s recount of the night that he met his wife, Roxy, and his subsequent spiral into alcoholism, provides much of the action - and great deal more than many of Carver's other narratives. Moreover, the narrative provides glimpses of the lives of a few of the other in-patients at the centre, as opposed to focusing exclusively on the circumstances of the protagonist-narrator. Carver thereby expands the scope of this narrative by presenting a community of individuals, who are connected not only by their alcoholism, but also by their implicit understanding of each other's suffering. Verley's argument that the unity of "Where I'm Calling From" is to be found in the subtle connections between J.P.'s experiences and the narrator's experiences is valid. Indeed, the narrative's structure of a story within a story invites the reader to draw comparisons between the experiences of the two characters: the narratives are, in the end, complementary versions of the same experience of alcoholism and project each narrator's understanding of the toll of their alcoholism on their lives and relationships. In fact, J.P.'s narrative becomes the lens through which the reader gains not only a better idea of who J.P. is, but also of who the narrator is. The narrator's responses to the critical events in J.P.'s life (over and above the fact that he chooses to relate these events to the reader, the events therefore having struck him as interesting) are the key to unlocking his own sensibilities and emotional interiority. Narration therefore plays an important role in the text.

Unlike the other narratives discussed in this study (and much of Carver's work in general), "Where I'm Calling From" is narrated in the first person. First person narration in "Where I'm Calling From" has at least two important functions. Firstly, it positions the reader as the listener or confidante to the narrator's reflections about his relationships with his wife and his girlfriend, his battle with alcoholism and his (indirectly communicated) hopes for the future, while he, in turn, listens to the 'life story' of Joe Penny and recounts this to the reader. Secondly, the directness of

mediation, even though the narrator tells the reader comparatively more about J.P.'s life than his own life, underscores the narrator's conscious effort to understand his own alcoholism and thereby re-define his identity. In listening to the experiences of an individual whom he recognises, with sardonic candour, to be, like him and the rest of the in-patients at Frank Martin's, 'first and foremost a drunk' (227), the narrator confronts his own demons - begins to see, through J.P., a reflection of not only his own suffering, but the suffering that he has caused others. The narrator recognises, most importantly that, to paraphrase Carver's words, he no longer wants the life he has. His 'surface' dialogue with J.P., initially a diversion - by his own admission - from 'his own situation' (232), enables the narrator to engage in a form of internal dialogue. J.P.'s painful reflections about his spiral into alcoholism and the impact that his drinking has had on his marriage cause the protagonist to reflect on his own embattled relationships with his estranged wife and his girlfriend. Communication and sympathetic identification between J.P. and the narrator facilitates the narrator's search for new horizons of meaning by which he might be able to determine a more positive future. The narrator, because of his interest in the story that J.P. narrates and his own imaginative investments and comparisons with his own experience, is able to comprehend the pain that he has caused his estranged wife and hence identifies – probably for the first time in a long while - sympathetically with her. These insights afford the narrator a chance to reform his behaviour and change his future. He is able to see, in the light of his sobriety, his own attenuated identity and existence.

Sympathy in "Where I'm Calling From", as in "A Small, Good Thing", is represented as an exchange: individuals finding in the experience of others equivalences with their own lives. Inasmuch as the activation of sympathy is still one of Carver's principle aims in his later fiction, the narrative strategies that he relies on are markedly different. While sympathy in Carver's pre-*Cathedral* fiction is generated via

his omissions – the reader's investments in the glimpses of the lives of individuals alienated in their despair - in his later fiction, he represents directly the exchanges of sympathy that take place between individuals. The characters that make almost accidental entrances into the lives of the protagonists replace the reader as sympathetic agents – individuals in whom the protagonists see their lives mirrored. Although the reader is required to make fewer investments in these narratives, Carver's representation of sympathy in operation supports his humanist aims: his aim to remind readers of the value of communication and communion.

Sympathetic identification between J.P. and the narrator is facilitated by their common predicament and therefore exemplifies Hume's point that sympathy is generally greater 'the stronger the relation is betwixt [the individual and the object of sympathy]'. J.P. and the narrator are able to identify each with the other because they are both in the same situation – they are each fighting the physiological effects of their addiction, an addiction that has had severe, but not irremediable, consequences for their lives and relationships. As the narrative progresses, so the narrator's sympathy for J.P. deepens. Initially, the narrator's sympathy for J.P. is limited to an understanding of the physical symptoms of withdrawal – when the narrator and J.P. first meet on the porch at Frank Martins, J.P. is unable to stop his hands from trembling. The narrator, having been through this phase of the recovery process,[37] tells him that he sympathises and assures him that in time the trembling will 'idle down' (227). The narrator, in the opening pages of "Where I'm Calling From",

[37] That this is the narrator's second 'stint' at Frank Martin's makes him all too aware of the possibility of relapse. The narrator is, however, far more resolute in his decision to fight his addiction and more determined to reclaim control of his life - like J.P., he is at 'Frank Martin's to dry out and to figure how to get his life back on track' (233). He recalls of his first stint at the centre, 'I didn't know if they could help me or not. Part of me wanted help. But there was another part' (235). This statement parallels Frank Martin's remark that Jack London's novel *The Call of the Wild* is 'about this animal that's half dog and half wolf. End of sermon' (235). The narrator, when he first went to the clinic, felt divided about whether he wanted to receive help and repair his failing marriage, or continue on his course of nihilistic destruction - heed the call to his animalistic impulses.

is preoccupied with the suddenness and unpredictability of Death. Immediately after he informs the reader of the pain that occurs intermittently in either his shoulder or at the side of his neck, he relates, in detail, the moment that Tiny suffered a seizure and keeled over on his chair at the breakfast table the previous morning. The narrator states that 'what happened to Tiny is something I won't ever forget' (228) – the image of 'Old Tiny flat on the floor, kicking his heels' (228). His fear that he too might suffer the same fate as Tiny, a fate which he on some level anticipates because of the effects of his alcoholism on his physical health, is evidenced by his remark, 'So every time this little flitter starts up anywhere, I draw breath and wait to find myself on my back, looking up, somebody's fingers in my mouth' (229). Yet, in fearing death, the narrator affirms the value of life.

The precarious balance between life and death is again illustrated in the first critical experience that J.P. relates to the narrator. He relates the story of when, as a child, he fell into a well in the vicinity of his father's farm. He observes that fortunately for him the well was dry, but then quips, with plaintive irony, that perhaps it was unfortunate, given the path of self-destruction that his life was to take subsequently. Just as the narrator tells the reader that he will never forget what happened to Tiny, so J.P. tells the narrator that he will never forget the experience of being trapped at the bottom of the well. For J.P., the experience of being faced with the possibility of death made 'everything about his life different' (229). Believing that if 'nothing closed off [the] little circle of blue [sky]' (229) he might stand a chance of being rescued, J.P. finds a way of combating his fear and creating hope. Kirk Nesset, in his article "Insularity and Self-Enlargement in Raymond Carver's *Cathedral*", argues that both J.P. and the narrator recognise in the symbol of the well significance for their own lives: both men have experienced hitting 'rock bottom' and understand that 'only through the intervening efforts of others', can they be rescued from the 'dark refuges in which they find themselves' (Nesset, 1994: 120).

Despite the fact that alcoholism has had such a negative impact on each of their lives, both the narrator and J.P. remain, at some level, hopeful that they will be able to 'get their lives back on track' by accepting the 'intervening efforts of others'. The events of the narrative take place on the eve of New Year and this in itself indicative is of the characters' resolve to change their circumstances. Rather than 'merely recycl[ing] their problems in the pretenses of temporary solutions' (Chenetier: 175), both J.P. and the narrator contemplate the first steps that they need to take in order to determine a better future – sobriety being, of course, the most important step. Carver presents two clear examples of positive change in both the narrator's and J.P.'s lives towards the end of the narrative. Roxy, J.P.'s wife, visits him at the clinic. Even though their home became a domestic war zone [38] as J.P.'s drinking increased and he became belligerent and violent, Roxy's support of her husband suggests a hopeful new beginning for their relationship. Quite atypically, Carver shows that love can prevail in even the most seemingly hopeless of relationships. The narrator recognises that the couple are in love:

> I see this woman stop the car and set the brake. I see J.P. open the door. I watch her get out, and see them hug each other. I look away. Then I look back. J.P. takes her by the arm and they come up the stairs. This woman broke a man's nose once. She has had two kids, and much trouble, but she loves this man who has her by the arm (239).

The narrator feels compelled to watch J.P. and his wife interact. From their actions, he sees that their love for each other runs deep, despite the fact that their marriage has been marred by violence and strife. Recalling J.P.'s story about the night that he

[38] The couple would fight continually; J.P.'s drinking made him reckless at work; and when Roxy entered into an extra-marital affair, J.P., in a fit of drunken rage, cut her wedding ring into pieces.

first met Roxy and how she gave him a chimney sweep's kiss for good luck, the narrator impulsively stops her as she and J.P. start to go inside:

> I know it's a dumb thing to do, but I do it anyway. "Roxy", I say. And they stop in the doorway and look at me. "I need some luck," I say. "No kidding. I could do with a kiss myself (240).

Like the baker's gesture of giving the Weisses bread rolls to eat, Roxy's gesture of kissing the narrator (even though she is no longer a chimney sweep) in his hour of need[39], shows just how meaningful even such small acts of genuine human compassion and understanding can be.

While "Where I'm Calling From" remains open-ended, the narrator's decision to call his wife and his girlfriend from the rehabilitation centre on New Year's Day provides an appropriate resolution. Establishing contact with these women is an indication that the narrator is hopeful that he might be able to begin each of these relationships on a more positive note in the New Year. That the narrator rehearses the telephone calls to his wife and his girlfriend indicates that he is beginning to imagine future possibilities – horizons beyond the rehabilitation centre, beyond his alcoholism. He imagines that his wife will probably ask him where he is calling from and that he will have to tell her, without making 'a joke' of his New Year resolution – his decision to give up alcohol - that he is calling from Frank Martin's rehabilitation centre. That he admits this to his wife is further indication of his resolve to fight his addiction. He imagines that when he telephones his girlfriend, his opening words will be, "Hello,

[39] The narrator admits that that morning he had wanted a drink. His hands, since morning, have also started to shake. His request for luck is a sign that he truly hopes to have the strength to overcome his addiction and to have a little more luck in love in the future.

sugar. It's me" (242) [40]. In saying the words 'it's me', the narrator asserts his existence, lays claim to his identity. The narrator, through listening to the narratives of others, begins a process of self-revelation that enables him to reach out towards others. The narrator's call to his girlfriend indicates that he is going to try to show his support of her as she faces a difficult time in her life – faces, what the reader assumes, is some kind of (cervical) cancer [41]. He recognises the importance of communication and communion in creating and maintaining positive relationships. Moreover, sobriety has led him to sympathise genuinely with his girlfriend's predicament – the fact that she may be facing death. Before he decides to make the telephone calls, the narrator remembers reading a story by Jack London called "To Build a Fire". He summarises what happens in the narrative as follows:

> 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* (my italics). … 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 in (242).

The narrator again contemplates the prospect of death. Here, he enters imaginatively into the situation and sentiments of the character in London's story. His own ability to imagine the fear of dying, impels him to contact his girlfriend. Sobriety and sympathy may indeed salvage the narrator's future.

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[40] Peter Donahue suggests that 'hope and possibility' are evident in the narrator's words 'It's me'. This is because 'by having launched his narrative and by having grafted the stories of his fellows in the treatment center to his own, he has begun to redefine himself. He has begun to create a new, never static, always promising subject that is the "me" ' (Donahue: 62).

[41] On Christmas Eve, the narrator's girlfriend received the results of her Pap smear. The 'news', the narrator informs the reader, 'was not cheery' (236). Rather than confront the problem, they both embark on a week-long drinking binge until he eventually says to her, 'Sugar, I think I'd better pack up. I better go back to Frank Martin's' (236). Further corroboration of the narrator's resolve to reclaim control of his life is the fact that he himself decided to go back to Frank Martin's. This contrasts with Joe Penny who was forcibly removed to the clinic by his father-in-law and brother-in-law.

Chapter Summary

The expansiveness of Carver's later fiction has two important and interrelated effects. The first of these is the way in which the narratives achieve their social resonance. The second is how sympathy is structured, and, correlatively, how Carver's new narrative strategies alter the view of human nature that he projects. While the social resonance of the narratives in chapter one is achieved primarily through Carver's omissions, the social resonance of the narratives in chapter two is achieved primarily via his themes. Carver's humanist aims in his post-*Cathedral* fiction are reflected in his representation of exchanges of sympathy between characters. Such exchanges are absent from his pre-*Cathedral* fiction, and so the burden of sympathetic recompense falls entirely to the reader, who reads in Carver's omissions a secular social order crippled by the erosion of such basic social values as love, compassion and communion. These values are re-affirmed in Carver's later fiction, as characters, in reaching out to others, are able to reach inwards and thereby re-chart the course of their lives.

CONCLUSION: Beyond Realism?

Two literary traditions have consistently been invoked in relation to Carver's fiction: realism and postmodernism. Realism and postmodernism embrace, however, completely antithetical aesthetic principles. While realist fiction aims to conceal its methods of construction and suppresses within its literary apparatuses the 'voice of the artist' (Smith: 42), postmodernist fiction draws attention to its methods of construction and, therefore, to the 'voice of the artist' (Smith: 42). The fact that Carver's fiction straddles such oppositional modes of representation attests to its inherent complexity, and few could dispute that the simplicity of Carver's language and style belies this complexity. That 'Carver's voice', as Skenazy argues, 'comes from outside [American] tradition [as] he doesn't so much inherit literary forms as take advantage of them' (Skenazy: 78), has interesting implications for literary criticism – if Carver conflates a range of literary forms, creating, in effect, a hybridised style, where, in a literary climate of competing '-isms', ought his fiction be designated?

Although Carver vehemently advocates in his non-fictional writings a return to realism, asserting in his introduction to *American Short Story Masterpieces* (1987) [42] that the 'reading public … has grown tired of the fragmentary [and] bizarre' and disenchanted with the wave of fabulist fiction (and as Carver dryly writes, 'all mutations, offshoots and fringe movements thereof') that monopolized the literary

[42] A companion volume to *Short Story Masterpieces* (1954), edited by Robert Penn Warren and Albert Erskine, *American Short Story Masterpieces* (1987) contains only (American) short stories conceived within what Carver calls a 'discernible narrative tradition' – realism. Carver, in the very selection of narratives that feature in this anthology, aims to remind readers that real masterpieces, which are able to withstand the 'tooth of time', always 'approximate life [and are] replete with recognizable people, and motive, and plot, and drama – fiction of *occurrence* and *consequence*' (Carver, 2000: 221). Incidentally, Carver identifies the years 1953 to 1986 as the 'most climactic and traumatic, period in American literary history … [during which] the currency of narrative fiction … fluctuated wildly and [was] assailed from several quarters' (Carver, 2000: 222).

establishment from the 1950s to 1980s, it is indeed ironic that his fiction should, despite its transparent mimesis, destabilize invisibly, almost imperceptibly, the conventions of realism. While realism doubtlessly describes the transparent mimesis of Carver's fiction, it fails to account in full for the effects of his narrative omissions. This is why 'realism' has been rejected in favour of other more contemporary modes (such as postmodernism and hyperrealism) that explain more convincingly the tension between the realist impulses and content of his fiction and its anti-realist effects. Carver's omissions are, it would seem, responsible for both the postmodernist and realist guises of his fiction.

An expanded definition of realism is required in order to examine how Carver subverts its basic principles. Carl Darryl Malmgren expands Becker's definition discussed at the end of chapter one, and identifies four fundamental principles of realist fiction. The first of these is that the most important 'reality' exists prior to its representation. The second is that the text comes into existence primarily to re-present that reality. The third is that the re-presentation will order the external world into a coherent and significant whole. The fourth is that the reader's exposure to this world should enable him or her to comprehend the real world more sharply and sensitively (Malmgren, 1985: 17). In order to effect these ends, and in contrast to modernist and postmodernist tendencies to use language self-relflexively, the realist writer's use of language is transparent and therefore acts as a 'window to the world' (Malmgren: 17). Despite the fact that Carver represents the external world with extraordinary transparency, his omissions destabilize the coherence of the fictive world and force the reader to order the events of this world into a significant whole: the reader is constantly forced to fill in the gaps in Carver's fiction and fight against, to recall Chenetier's point, its 'elements of indeterminacy'. As the reader fills in the silences of Carver's fiction, he or she inscribes his or her own ideological referents into the text and aligns himself or herself sympathetically with the characters.

Language and technique in Carver act together as both a 'window to the world' and as a window to such meta-fictional concerns as language and the inscription of subjectivity within a whole network of social discourses and institutions – marriage, divorce, politics, class structures etcetera. This would indicate that Carver's fiction leans pre-emptively toward a tradition of postmodernism rather than realism.

Arthur A. Brown, like Marc Chenetier, traces the postmodernist course that Carver plots in his fiction. In order to draw a distinction between realism and postmodernism, Brown recalls a lesson in contour drawing that he once observed. In this lesson, he explains, students were asked to draw the image of a tree without ever lifting the pencil from the paper. Brown argues that the contour drawing (the image of the contours of the tree in the process of being drawn) is a:

> metaphor for postmodern fiction, with its attention to surface detail, its resistance to depth, and its aspect of self-consciousness, where the medium merges with the subject – the creation of the fiction is the subject of the fiction (Brown, 1990: 125).

The language of realist fiction, by contrast, is neither the subject nor focal point of the work. In other words, if postmodernist fiction presents both the work (and, by correlation, the writer's view of the world) as always being in the process of creation, then realist fiction presents the world and the work as product. Expanding on the tenets of postmodernism, Brown later states:

> One of postmodern fiction's assumed roles is to remind the reader not only of how he reads the text but, by extension, of how he reads the world. In reading we are creating reflections of ourselves, as there is no perception without a perceiver. The world, like the text, is a fictional

> construct – although unlike the text is also real. We identify our own search for identity with the writer's and vice versa. By reminding us of this, the writer is doubly (or infinitely) identified, and so is the reader. This is the reason that mirrors are so prevalent a sign in postmodern fiction, as they are in Carver's stories, for they represent the text itself. If windows are a symbol of [realist] fiction, mirrors are a symbol of postmodern fiction. Looking into them is no small matter, for the character's, the writer's, and the reader's existences are affirmed – and perhaps altered – in them (Brown: 129).

Carver undeniably causes the reader to think simultaneously about how he or she reads his texts and about how he or she reads the world. Because Carver presents in his fiction the contours of a universal experience [43], he 'shocks' the reader into 'recognition' (Carver, 2000: 223). In other words, as Brown argues, he reminds the reader of his or her own existence. As the reader fills in the blanks of his narratives, he or she indeed 'identif[ies] his or her 'search for identity with the writer's' – his or her own views of the world in relation to those of the author and the characters represented in the narratives. Carver's omissions therefore produce a form of intra-personal (and internal) dialogue that compels the reader to reassess how he or she reads the world. Moreover, by writing America (and the world) via a language of silence, Carver creates the possibility for a wide range of investments to be made in the lacunas of his narratives and hence he creates the possibility for a multiplicity of interpretations.

[43] Although Carver invokes the cultural iconography of middle and lower class America – motels, diners, Cable T.V. etcetera - he rarely, unlike his contemporaries, makes specific reference to brand names, slogans, cultural personas etcetera. Carver's fiction is seldom given a specific geographical or historical location and this confers on his fiction a universal resonance.

Yet, to label Carver's fiction 'postmodernist' would be to forget that his fiction is seldom overtly or predominantly about its own creation or development. Brown argues that what makes Carver's fiction 'remarkable' is that he 'never loses sight of his subject, which is real life, even while his subject is also the creation of fiction' (Brown: 125). This is an astute point, which shows that the view that the differences between realism and postmodernism are irreconcilable is mistaken. Allan Lloyd Smith argues similarly and states that 'most contemporary writers work in both forms, mixing transparent with opaque modes in their fiction' (Smith: 39). Despite the fact that Carver's neo-realism transcends the conventions that define traditional realism, its gaps simultaneously creating the illusion of transparency and negating that transparency, Carver seldom, if ever, implodes linguistic signs in order to critique the 'claims of literature and art to truth and human value' (Hutcheon, 1980: 3). To the contrary, Carver valorises the intrinsic power of language, of literature, to reflect universal truths and to discover human value. His fiction, rather than 'searching for the principle of its intelligibility in [its] own development' (Hutcheon: 12), searches for principles by which we might record our own social development. This impulse gathered momentum in Carver's fiction. From the vision of fragmented identities projected in "They're Not Your Husband" and "Neighbors"; the existential despair projected in "The Bath" and "Furious Seasons"; and the plaintive sense of loss and 'lucid madness', to use Smith's phrase again, projected in "Why Don't You Dance?" and "Careful", to the vision of horizons of hope projected in "A Small, Good Thing" and "Where I'm Calling From", Carver has always remained committed to bearing witness to the extraordinary 'business of living'. The social purpose of Carver's post-*Cathedral* fiction is more direct than his pre-*Cathedral* fiction due to his representation of individuals within an implied wider community. Carver therefore seems to announce directly through his later narratives his express intention to examine the relationship between ordinary citizens and their social milieu, which has, as Boudreau argues, always been the principle aim of American literature.

Carver is pre-eminently interested in representing scenes that enable his readers 'to comprehend the real world more sharply and sensitively', scenes that ultimately co-opt his readers into bearing witness to the relentless causality of occurrence and consequence. Carver's project of sympathy relies on the depiction of ordinary lives so that the reader can find equivalences with their own lives, see their own social experience reflected in that of others. Even though Carver's fictional haunt is always the syndrome of small-time lives in small-time places, his fiction can be defended, as Carlin Warren contends, against John Updike's complaint that despite 'the mechanical excellence of … writers (whose oeuvre is small-town America) their fiction is too localized, too provincial, and as a result the themes [of their fiction] too limited' (Warren: 1988: 87). Carver's themes achieve a universal and transcendent significance because he refuses to place specific temporal or historical constraints on his fiction – although America is the implied backdrop of his fiction, it is figured in the silences of his fiction. 'Carver country', to borrow Scobie's phrase, cannot be identified with a particular 'geographical' (Scobie: 275) location for Carver's fiction speaks to a universal audience and an a-historical world.

Furthermore, there is always in Carver's fiction, as Tess Gallagher writes, 'the mandate of having something at stake' (Carver: 2000: xiv): a reminder of '"what counts": Love, death, dreams, ambition, growing up, coming to terms with your own and other people's limitations"' (Carver; 2000: xiv).

By engaging with the experience of Carver's characters, and by making investments in the omissions of his narratives, the reader enters into dialogue with people whose derailed lives remind them constantly of their own limitations. That Carver provides in the omissions of his narratives opportunity for dialogue is a crucial part of his project of sympathy. As the reader identifies imaginatively with others – begins to view the world from the perspective of others - so he or she is pressured to reassess his or

her view of the world and redefine his or her attitudes to such issues as love, death, dreams, ambition, success and failure. Carver projects these grand themes via the commonplace and ordinary situations of everyday life and finds in them dilemmas of conscience that in themselves remind individuals of their humanity – their quest to find personal truth and salvation.

The omissions of Carver's language ultimately reveal the moral complexities that define human experience. These spaces invite the reader to engage intellectually, emotionally and imaginatively with debates that, since the genesis of realism, have always remained open-ended. Carver's omissions, as much as his themes, therefore generate the social resonance of his fiction.

If Carver's fiction achieves its resonance via narrative omissions, which could indeed be read as postmodernist metonymic devices, then Carver indeed challenges the parameters of traditional realism and possibly even reinvents it. The ascription of a classificatory label to Carver's fiction ought, in theory, to be based on the mode that his fiction approximates most rather than appropriates definitively. Yet, Carver interweaves the hallmarks of realism and postmodernism so invisibly that debates about where his fiction belongs will probably remain, like his narratives, inconclusive.

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