

THE CARVER CHRONOTOPE:  
CONTEXTUALIZING RAYMOND CARVER

by

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## ABSTRACT

Raymond Carver's fiction is a literary representation of the middle-class consciousness of diminishment in the late capitalist America of the 1970s and 1980s. "The Carver Chronotope" uses a central concept of Bakhtin's novelistics to formulate a newly coherent context for understanding the minimalist fiction of Raymond Carver. I begin by briefly describing the critical reception of Carver's work, and then stake out my own intellectual and imaginative territory by asserting that Carver's fiction can be understood as constituting, in its totality, a kind of diffuse, fragmentary, randomly-ordered novel. I reconstruct the figure of the writer who would be capable of producing such a complex text from the few writer-characters who are presented in the work itself, and from elements of the Carver biography.

"The Carver Chronotope" traces literary influences and explores the world which the writer wants to tell about; thus, the "Carver Chronotope" is about communication. I show the connections between various levels of territorialization within the chronotope, focusing on the relationships between characters and the kinds of physical environments they inhabit, the relationships between characters and their own bodily existences, and the relationships between characters and the kinds of families in which they are raised.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Christine Frederick, who first suggested that I should write on Carver, and who has stuck with me through the whole thing.

The chronotope is "a formally constitutive category of literature . . . [within which] spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history."

-M.M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel."

"The short story writer's task is to invest the glimpse with all that is in his power. He'll bring his intelligence and literary skill to bear (his talent), his sense of proportion and sense of the fitness of things: of how things out there really are and how he sees those things--like no one else sees them. And this is done through the use of clear and specific language, language used so as to bring to life the details that will light up the story for the reader. For the details to be concrete and convey meaning, the language must be accurate and precisely given. The words can be so precise they may even sound flat; but they can still carry; if used right, they can hit all the notes."

-Raymond Carver, "On Writing"

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## **I. Introduction to the Carver Chronotope: Critical Context**

To begin a project such as this--an extended meditation on the significance of a contemporary writer--requires something like a leap of faith, a sincere belief that the object of study merits the work involved in the construction of a point of view regarding this writer's contribution to his or her national, and perhaps world, literature. The study of contemporary writers is especially perilous to the scholar who would like to think that one's work has some lasting contribution to make to the understanding of a certain moment in history, since there is no guarantee that future readers will consider the contribution of a particular writer, within the context of a future which one cannot possibly predict or anticipate with any certainty, to be as significant as one does in the discrete historical moment of the contemporary scholar. So this is where one must begin--asserting a belief that the writer one has chosen to study is indeed worthy of that study.

Raymond Carver (1938-88) is often credited with single-handedly inspiring a renaissance of the short story in America, and with giving voice to a submerged population, who before his time had not been adequately recognized in the cultural space of American literature. Carver devoted his whole career as a writer to working within two genres--the short story and the lyric poem

--both of which are, within the context of late twentieth century literature and culture, assuredly minor artistic genres. And yet, in spite of working within these marginal genres, Carver somehow managed to create some major artistic and cultural effects. His writing has the ability to affect individual readers, including many who do not usually read literature,<sup>1</sup> and is a lightning rod for cultural and aesthetic debate surrounding issues of the writer's role in contemporary North American life.

The institutional reception of Carver's work breaks down into two main camps. The first group responds very positively to Carver's work, and consists mainly of those writers who are grouped with Carver as minimalists, neo-realists, dirty realists, etc.--Richard Ford, Frederick Barthelme, Bobbie Ann Mason and Jayne Ann Phillips, to name but a few. Associated with these literary practitioners are a number of academics, as well as a popular readership. Admirers of Carver's writing tend to cite the clarity and straightforwardness of his prose, his ability to invest the ordinary with extraordinary intensity, as well as the implicit valorization of an experiential ground for writing over a theoretical one, as the source of its power.

Those who dislike, or distrust, Carver's work break down further into two main groups. First there are those who find Carver's vision of America much too bleak and pessimistic. This

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Buzbee relates a story about how a truck driver stumbled upon Carver's book *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. After reading the book, the man explained that, "while he normally didn't read, he had been intrigued by the book's title and read the book from beginning to end, unable to stop" (114).

would include both editors who would not take a chance on publishing his first collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, in the 1970s,<sup>2</sup> and critics with a right-wing political agenda who, once Carver became a literary star, thought his work did not fit in with the ideological agenda of America in the 1980s.

Far more deserving of serious consideration is the criticism of Carver's work which comes from the left wing of the political-academic spectrum, from those critics concerned with the problem of ideology and its propagation through the medium of literature. In his book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*, Fredric Jameson argues for a critical position which has implications for a preferred object of study as well as a preferred method of study. Jameson proclaims that ideology critique

. . . can no longer be content with its demystifying vocation to unmask and to demonstrate the ways in which a cultural artifact fulfills a specific ideological mission, in legitimating a given power structure, in perpetuating and reproducing the latter, and in generating specific forms of false consciousness (or ideology in the narrower sense). It must not cease to practice this essentially negative hermeneutic function

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Unger recalls how "no publisher anywhere in the country would accept [Carver's first] book. . . . The collection represented fourteen years of work. Editors found the stories too depressing, or not in tune with what the culture wanted to read" (Halpert, "Glimpses: Raymond Carver" 270).

. . . but must also seek, through and beyond this demonstration of the instrumental function of a given cultural object, to project its simultaneously Utopian power as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity. (291)

Jameson calls for a criticism which goes beyond merely demonstrating the existence of the ideological matter carried suspended in the language-stream of a literary work, for a criticism which projects a utopian, counter-ideology to stand in active resistance to the hegemonic ideological discourse of late capitalism.

It is not very far from Jameson's idea of an interventionist criticism to the idea of an interventionist literature, where a utopian alternative to the status quo is projected by the literary work itself, just waiting for the critic to arrive to bring it to its fullest expression. This is the position from which the most astute, negative critics of Carver launch their various attacks on his work. For instance, Frank Lentricchia, in an essay introducing an issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly* devoted to the novels of Don DeLillo, dismisses the work of writers such as Carver as "a minor, apolitical, domestic fiction of the triumphs and agonies of autonomous private individuals operating in 'the private sector'" (241). Lentricchia argues that the "main" line of American literature, "from Emerson to Pynchon and DeLillo . . . is political" (244), while the domestic realism of Carver and his minimalist cohorts is "the soft humanist underbelly of American literature."

In other words, Lentricchia believes Carver is a dupe of late capitalism, a writer whose work somehow serves to reinforce the hegemonic ideological discourse of late capitalism rather than engaging in a disruptive and utopian counter-discourse.

Another critic who takes a similar tack in his approach to Carver is Alan Wilde, who, in the chapter "Shooting for Smallness: Realism and Midfiction," from his book-length study of contemporary American fiction, denounces as "catatonic" the contemporary realism that takes Raymond Carver to be its exemplar. Wilde argues that the "catatonic realists," by taking reality for granted, affirm the reality of the age, and "through their characters and in their own voices [reveal] not the direct image but the reverse side of humanist control: the experience, terrifying and reductive, of *being* controlled" (111). Wilde thinks that the failure of the narrative in contemporary realism to try and make sense of the world for the reader, and thus "to acquiesce in its apparent disorder [,] is to conflate the personal and the metaphysical and in making the intractability of the universe the measure of possibility at all levels of existence, to assume the pointlessness of any action whatsoever" (114).

At least David Kaufmann will admit both a positive and a negative side to Carver's writing: "it reduces suffering to entertainment [while creating] a new . . . mode of publicity and circulation for the expression of needs" (112). Kaufmann thinks that minimalist fiction such as Carver's does something in terms of the critique of ideology, if not enough for his liking, and locates

the cause of its lacking at the sentence level. He claims that parataxis, "a disjunctive style marked by its avoidance of grammatical subordination" (93), is the most salient feature of minimalist fiction, in which "the inability to subordinate, to organize material in anything other than chronological order, gets folded back into a larger inability to conceptualize and articulate" (99). "The cool surfaces" which distinguish this kind of writing "mark a deliberate denial of sentimentality and affect. Parataxis . . . separates will from action and desire from will. It magnifies the importance of the interpretation which it does not, or cannot provide. It renders enigmatic the world it appears to describe. . . . It can serve to obscure, if not destroy, a story's pathos, thus encouraging the readers to view the sorrows of others as an aesthetic or as an epistemological problem" (101-102).

The failure to provide an interpretation of events through authorial control of the narrative places the onus of understanding squarely on the reader, which, according to Diane Stevenson, presumes a consensus, "a class code, a consumer code" (88). According to Stevenson, the minimalists are guilty of reifying the middle class: "Left to its own devices . . . surface will point to something beyond, will imply something other and absent, and as a consequence is a far more serious transcendentalism than outright transcendentalism" (88). Stevenson assumes that a middle class audience, left with no authorial presence to steer the process of signification, will inevitably construct interpretations out of the reified values of the consumerist culture which define

the boundaries of their consciousness. Even the gradual movement toward endings that reflect a cautious hope for redemption of some sort in the later stories of Raymond Carver are, according to Kaufmann, "only ciphers, promissory notes for a deferred future, images whose content has yet to be inscribed" (112). While Kaufmann thinks this movement is in the right general direction, he still asserts that the near-epiphanic ending of a late Carver story is "ideological in that it supports the existent by remaining within it. These figures of solidarity arise from and are caught within the very horizons whose depletion they protest against" (112). These stories try too "gingerly . . . to figure utopia" to please the likes of David Kaufmann and company.

What these utopian critics take for granted are a number of assumptions about what constitutes literary value, mainly concerning their reification of the writer figure as a politically engaged social prophet, a Shelleyean legislator of the species. It is by no means a given that this particular construction of the writer-figure is the only appropriate one for a contemporary writer to choose, and, in fact, it could be argued that this writerly role, like all the other kinds of roles an individual human being can choose to take on, is only capable of being articulated in a particular social and historical epoch. The utopian critics denigrate Carver's choice of a kind of literary practice (genre, style, etc.) rather than criticizing the work done on its own terms. The critics who celebrate Carver's work construct an alternative interpretive system, one based on the valorization of artistic integrity rather



than on analytical intelligence and ideology critique. The pro-Carver critics assign value not to the extent to which a writer operates as an agent of ideological investigation and social change, but rather to the degree to which the writer is true both to the work itself and to the kind of world it purports to represent.<sup>3</sup>

The utopian critics are like those persons (who Nikolai Stepanovich, in Chekhov's "A Boring Story," says are "narrow-minded and embittered") who "can bear a grudge against ordinary people for not being heroes" (Chekhov 51). The utopian critics want writers who are heroes of the intellect, and Carver was neither an intellectual nor a hero. In fact, his stock-in-trade is generally acknowledged to be his ordinariness and his eschewal of heroics.<sup>4</sup> As James Atlas puts it in his review of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, "The barren idiom of our time is an idiom of refusal, a repudiation of the idea of greatness" (98). Carver refuses to say more than he knows, and he does not profess to know much in the ways that philosophers, historians and academic literary critics do. For this reason Carver's choice of a minor literary genre in which to do the bulk of his work makes perfect sense. As Kasia Boddy points out in an essay on Carver and

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Barthelme distinguishes between realism, which "stands for a whole system of literary artifice, and representation, which stands for only one part of the system" (Karlsson 145). Barthelme rejects the kind of traditional realist epistemology described by Fredric Jameson in his Foreword to Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, one "which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it . . . a mirror theory of knowledge and art" (viii). Karlsson describes the minimalist attack on realism as "an invisible subversion" which invokes worlds which are "conspicuously real and, paradoxically, remarkably artificial" (145).

<sup>4</sup> Significantly, the title for the posthumous book which brings together his previously uncollected writings is *No Heroics, Please*.

Chekhov as "companion-souls": "It is no coincidence to find that both Chekhov and Carver renounce the integration and causal narrative structure of the traditional novel in favour of the open-endedness and indeterminacy of the short story as a means of expressing the experience of sheer accident that dominates the lives of their protagonists" (108). So Wilde is right, at least as far as his assertion that the kind of fiction practised by Carver and his cohorts is about the degree to which human lives are controlled by outside forces in a late capitalist society. But the heroism he associates with the desire to exert control over one's environment is suspect, if not naive, and ignores the possibilities of pure contingency. Wilde's critique reflects his belief in the humanist idea that knowledge leads to understanding, and understanding to control. But, as Boddy observes, Carver, like Chekhov, lacks "a political, religious and philosophical worldview," and does not "believe in anything that [cannot] be apprehended by one or more of [the] five senses" (108-09).<sup>5</sup> Carver's allegiances lie with the concrete over the abstract, the material over the metaphysical.

Of course, Boddy's assertions concerning the open-endedness of the short story as form are naive also. Various poststructural theorists have demonstrated that the integration and structure of the traditional novel is an illusion of language, and that language itself lacks the kind of coherence which humanist ideology has

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<sup>5</sup> Boddy here is quoting the Chekhov represented in one of Carver's final published stories, "Errand." The lines quoted above serve to differentiate the aesthetics of Chekhov from Tolstoy, who in the story has come to visit Chekhov on his deathbed (*Where I'm Calling From* 383).

always presumed it had. Contrary to Boddy's line of thought, most literary theorists consider the short story as form to be much more concerned with the idea of closure than the traditional novel, which because of its epic sprawl always leaves some questions unanswered, some narrative threads unaccounted for in the weave. And if we take into account the contemporary novelistics of Thomas Pynchon, the ideas of closure and unity seem rustic indeed. Nevertheless, Boddy is justified in focusing on the elements of contingency and determinism that are expressed in the work of Carver and Chekhov. In fact, Carver goes so far as to explain his choice of a literary genre to work within as being determined by the circumstances of his life. In "*The Paris Review* Interview," Carver tells Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee that

After years of working crap jobs and raising kids and trying to write, I realized I needed to write things I could finish and be done with in a hurry. There was no way I could undertake a novel, a two- or three-year stretch of work on a single project. I needed to write something I could get some kind of payoff from immediately. . . . I was beginning to see that my life was not . . . what I wanted it to be. (37)

Carver presents his decision to concentrate on short forms as a hard choice made in the grim face of necessity, and as a way of reconciling his intensely felt need to be a writer with the awareness "that the life [he] was in was vastly different from the lives of the writers [he] most admired . . . who didn't spend their

Saturdays at the laundromat and every waking hour subject to the needs and caprices of their children" ("Fires" 33).<sup>6</sup>

Further on in the essay "Fires," Carver constructs a somewhat loftier rationale for not committing to a novel:

To write a novel, it seemed to me, a writer should be living in a world that makes sense, a world that the writer can believe in, draw a bead on, and then write about accurately. A world that will, for a while anyway, stay fixed in one place. Along with this there has to be a belief in the essential *correctness* of that world. A belief that the known world has reasons for existing, and is worth writing about, is not likely to go up in smoke in the process. This wasn't the case with the world I knew and was living in. My world was one that seemed to change gears and directions, along with its rules, every day. (35)

This rationale might be construed as Carver's ironic gesture towards those critics who wanted a more conceptual rejection of the novel. And yet there is still something in this statement entirely faithful to the work of a writer who aspired to connect with readers through strategies of representation, rather than constructing fabulous structures which bore little resemblance to

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<sup>6</sup> All references to *Fires* are to the Vintage Contemporaries Edition, first published in 1989. *Fires* was first published in 1983 by Capra Press, and this edition was picked up and re-issued by Random House (Vintage) in 1984. The 1989 edition contains the same poems and stories as the 1983 edition, although there are changes in the essays included. I choose to refer to the 1989 edition because it is more easily accessible than the 1983 edition.

a recognizable reality. Carver thought he could not make enough sense out of the world he lived in to base a novel-length work on it, and he did not have enough faith in his creative powers to attempt to will an even partly coherent version of the world into existence.

As a writer, Carver was acutely aware of his limitations, and possessed a strong literary conscience or superego. Jay McInerney talks about Carver's "respect for the language" as "humility bordering on dread" (120), and Ewing Campbell sees Carver's self-limiting, his compulsion to remain within the comfort zone of minimalist technique, as deriving from "an obsessive desire to avoid great glares" (13). John W. Aldridge characterizes Carver as a writer whose "effortless mastery is frequently revealed to be the result of an extremely modest intention" (56). No doubt Carver's background had something to do with the modesty of his literary intentions. As the son of a saw-filer, raised in the backwoods of Washington state and educated at small, state universities, Carver was denied the kind of comfortable indoctrination into middle-class reality that most American writers benefit from, not to mention the sense of confidence and self-control which comes from growing up in a stable environment. No doubt he felt himself to be an interloper in both the literary limelight and the halls of academe.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It would be interesting to do an analysis of the class background of American writers and literary critics. I suspect we would find that although the background of both would be predominantly middle-class, that the class background of the critics would be skewed toward the higher end of the

When Aldridge describes Carver's work as coming into being "against the resistance of an enormous internal pressure to be silent," and "as the verbal index perhaps of some deeply lodged visceral conviction that there is very little of any worth to be said about the sorry state of human existence" (56), he is on to something, even if his own entrenched position obscures his view.<sup>8</sup> Aldridge does not recognize that Carver is our foremost poet of the despair born of incomprehension, and that readers respond to what Wilde calls the catatonic voice in Carver's fiction as a "defense against desire and despair alike" (112). In the interview conducted by Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory in 1984, Carver makes explicit the connection between the incomprehension he felt about the "incorrect," irrational world he lived in as a young father and writer, and the psychic state of utter despair and hopelessness (100). And yet Carver was able to translate his own sense of despair into the language of a fiction utterly appropriate to the time in which he lived, and to the lives of the people he witnessed around him. Further on in this interview, Carver states, "Essentially, I *am* one of those confused, befuddled people, I come from people like that, those are the people I've worked with and earned my living beside for years" (112). Carver's background and upbringing help to determine his proclivity for playing his literary cards close to the chest. Coming

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socioeconomic scale. There is so much of the brahmin in their collective will to judgement.

<sup>8</sup> Russell Banks refutes Aldridge's argument in a review in *The Atlantic Monthly* entitled "A Dyspeptic View of Nineties Fiction." (May 1992): 120-27.

from a lower-class economic environment, and growing up without the kinds of cultural advantages which members of the middle-class take as their birthright, Carver remained true to the minimalistic advice which his father gave him when he first told his father that he wanted to be a writer: "Write about stuff you know about" ("My Father's Life," *Fires* 19).

In the eyes of many, Carver will remain a minor writer because he chose to write in minor genres, and because the range of his subject matter is so limited. To counter this line of thinking, it is useful to juxtapose statements by two eminent literary thinkers. The first, by Frank Kermode, suggests the degree to which major effects can be achieved with minimalist techniques. Kermode states that Carver's is a "fiction so spare in manner that it takes time before one realizes how completely a whole culture and a whole moral condition are being represented by even the most seemingly slight sketch" (5). The second statement, by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, suggests what the novel can achieve:

In the novel, the entire world and all of life are given in the cross-section of the *integrity of the epoch*. The events depicted in the novel should somehow *substitute for* the total life of the epoch. In their capacity to represent the real-life whole lies their artistic essentiality. ("The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism 43).

Kermode and Bakhtin seem to be talking about very similar effects arising from literary work done in different genres of fiction. Based on this similarity of effect, I propose that it is possible to think of Carver's work as engaging in what Bakhtin terms "novelistic discourse" if we consider his total output as a kind of loosely structured, polyphonic novel, capturing the many voices of an American underclass, rather than as many modulations of a single monologic voice, as Miriam Marty Clark does in her short essay, "Raymond Carver's Monologic Imagination."

Thinking of Carver's output as one large novel (perhaps called "Raymond Carver's America", "Hopelessville USA," or "Carver Country"--the latter two tags already being in circulation amongst Carver critics) is not as strange as it might at first seem. After all, Bakhtin defines the novel "as a diversity of social speech types . . . and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" ("Discourse in the Novel" 262). Michael Holquist, in his introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination*, states that "'novelization' is fundamentally anti-canonical" and that "'novel' is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system" (xxxi). In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin refines the ideas cited above from the essay on the *bildungsroman*: "The social and historical voices populating language . . . are organized in the novel into a structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid the



heteroglossia of his epoch" (300). Furthermore, "The novel begins by presuming a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world, a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness, which no longer possesses a sacrosanct and unitary linguistic medium for containing ideological thought" (367). Carver writes in a minor language, the vernacular of the dispossessed, mainly white, lower middle- and working-classes, those who inhabit a decentered America, "devoid of its unifying myths" (Clarke 106). This language is the active site of the struggle between its users and the technocratic-business elite, the very field of ideological contention.

Carver's work, considered as a totality, constitutes what Bakhtin calls a chronotope, "a formally constitutive category of literature . . . [within which] spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 84). The Carver chronotope is the concrete embodiment in language, working through techniques of novelistic or post-novelistic discourse, of what Bakhtin calls "the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness" ("Epic and Novel" 11). It is the chronotope of a literary work that defines its artistic unity, which in turn mediates its "relationship to an actual reality" ("Chronotope" 243).

The Carver chronotope makes artistically visible a discrete historical moment in the ongoing project that the world knows as America. Whereas the work of writers such as Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme embodies "the explosive contradictions" of the 1960s in all its fragmentation, surrealism and carnival atmosphere (Dickstein 507), the Carver chronotope embodies the downbeat mood of America in the 1970s: post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-energy crisis. The seventies were a time of widespread cultural malaise in America, a moment when the great collective promise of the New World appeared to be failing. It is a time of disenchantment, when those who had profited from the unprecedented expansion of the American economy after the second world war started to see the possibility of declining expectations. Christopher Lasch, in his book *The Minimal Self*, describes the art appropriate to such a historical moment as "an anti-art or minimal art . . . [referring] to a widespread conviction that art can survive only by a drastic restriction of its field of vision" (131). The embattled, heroic self-assertion of a Pynchon proves impossible to sustain; instead literary art turns to "an immersion in the ordinary, a deliberate effacement of the artist's personality, a rejection of clarifying contexts that show relationships among objects or events, a refusal to find patterns of any kind, an insistence on the random quality of existence, an insistence that 'each thing can be and is separate from each and every other'" (132). Morton Marcus, a friend of Carver's in the early days, describes Carver's stories as "scenarios of our worst

dreams about the reality of our neighbors' existences, scenarios about the spiritual barrenness at the heart of American life which the majority of us were living" (57). In retrospect, Marcus locates the awful negative power of Carver's stories in the way that the America they imagine "has become the truth of our lives--the unemployment, the fear of homelessness . . . the terror of being poor or disenfranchised in this land of milk and acid" (58).

Postwar Americans were told to put their faith in materialism, and when prosperity began to wane they found they had no spiritual resources to sustain them.

Georg Lukacs defines the novel as "the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (56). The Carver chronotope goes beyond the assertion of a totalizing impulse to confront the radical sense of incomprehension of people caught in the transformation of America from an industrial economy to a post-industrial economy. The Carver chronotope is the epic of an era of diminishment, where the unity provided by the figure of the hero, a being endowed with a sense of self-possession and purpose, is no longer a plausible structural principle for a writer concerned with a true representation of the spirit of his time. And yet the Carver chronotope does not present the late capitalist mimesis of the demographer--the dispassionate, statistical analysis of the consumer behaviors and attributes of late twentieth century North Americans--for that would be to serve

the agenda of the corporate elite which largely determines the fate of post modern humanity. Instead, Carver presents the poetic truth of the content of the individual lives that make up these statistical, abstract populations, and invests them with whatever small dignities his status as a writer can confer on them.

In this study, I will concentrate my energies on a phenomenological and hermeneutical approach in an attempt to interpret the significance of the Carver chronotope as the concrete aesthetic embodiment of a particular time and place. To this end I will posit the existence of at least four major components to the Carver chronotope. The first is the construction of the figure of the writer as a self-limiting, anti-heroic entity, who nevertheless is able to provide the chronotope with whatever dignity and unity it has. The second concerns the problems surrounding the depiction of specific geographic and historical spaces within the chronotope, and concentrates on tracing a degradation of the idea of wilderness within the American literary imagination. The third concerns the ontological status of the body for the inhabitants of these spaces as a site of contestation between an inner-need for self-possession and the claims that a late capitalist ideology makes upon the body. Finally, the fourth component concerns the organization of human beings within the family (the basic unit of production in the capitalist economy, according to Adam Smith), and the deconstruction of the mythology of the nuclear family as a safe territory in an otherwise dangerous world. I do not suggest that these four components circumscribe the totality of the Carver

chronotope--on the contrary, I believe that the fundamental indeterminacy of Carver's post-novelistic discourse makes possible a vast number of interpretive and heuristic strategies. However, I do believe that the areas I have chosen to focus on comprise a significant portion of the heart of the Carver chronotope.

## II. The Cultural and Aesthetic Construction of the Writer in a Depressed America

"History . . . confronts the writer with a necessary option between several moral attitudes connected with language. . . ."

-Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (2)

"The writer is a person who is able to work in a language while standing outside language, who has the gift of indirect speaking."

-M.M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of the Text," *Speech Genres*  
(110)

### A. The Figure of the Writer in the Carver Chronotope

A feature common to all manifestations of the Carver chronotope is a movement of diminishment or degradation, of things running down. Thus it should come as no surprise that the figure of the writer, as constructed in Carver's work, is an anti-heroic figure more interested in "the methods of absolution" (Gallagher, Foreword 12) than in those of self-expression.<sup>9</sup> Carver is concerned with writing as an act of communication. In the short

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<sup>9</sup> Unlike the minimalism of Samuel Beckett, here speaking sympathetically of the painter Bram Van Velde's work as an art that expresses "that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express--together with the obligation to express" (quoted in Barth 9).

essay where Carver explains the poem "For Tess," Carver argues that

A poem or a story--any literary work that presumes to call itself art--is an act of communication between the writer and the reader. . . . The need is always to translate one's thoughts and deepest concerns into language which casts these thoughts and concerns into a form--fictional or poetic--in the hope that a reader might understand and experience those same feelings and concerns. (*No Heroics, Please* 121)

Tobias Wolff, in the book *When We Talk About Raymond Carver*, comments on the aesthetic mode of communication practised by Carver and his fellow minimalists: "A good writer should make you feel as if he lived the story he is telling. . . . It is an artistic achievement to make someone feel they have had an encounter with reality, when what they have had an encounter with is a writer's imagination" (Halpert 8). But the minimalist methodology is not simply a regression into the mystery doctrine of a pre-modernist realism, rather it is a deceptively sophisticated way of writing which takes into account all the lessons of post-modernism. As Frederick Barthelme explains in his essay "On Being Wrong: Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean," the minimalist methodology hinges on the realization "that people [are] more interesting than words . . . joined by the sense that ordinary experience--almost *any* ordinary experience--[is] essentially more complex and interesting than a well-contrived encounter with big-

L Language" (25). Minimalist fiction wants to engage its audience in a fictive dialogue, but one which moves beyond the status of a language game that can only be played by initiates. In doing so, minimalist fiction reactivates discredited terms from metaphysics, terms such as authenticity and morality.<sup>10</sup>

The possibility of an authentic communication between writer and reader is effected through the use of plain language. In its use of everyday language, minimalist fiction looks back to the poetic program of Wordsworth and Coleridge, who talked about writing in the language of real men and women rather than in a highly specialized literary language. In the essay "Fires," Carver credits his teacher, John Gardner, with impressing upon him the utter necessity for using the language of everyday life in order to best achieve communication between writer and reader:

I remember him . . . telling me over and over how important it was to have the right words saying what I wanted them to say. Nothing vague or blurred, no smoked-glass prose. And he kept drumming at me the importance of using . . . common language, the language of normal discourse, the language we speak to each other in. (37)

And, as Carver explains in the essay "On Writing," the use of plain language does not necessarily preclude the communication of profoundly heightened emotional states: "It's possible . . . to write

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<sup>10</sup> The problems surrounding the aesthetic construction of morality will be addressed in the final chapter here.



about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things . . . with immense, even startling power" (*Fires* 24).<sup>11</sup> Thus the quote from Ezra Pound that Carver had on a three-by-five card on the wall beside his desk in Syracuse: "Fundamental accuracy of statement is the ONE sole morality of writing" (23).

The use of plain language is the most obvious manifestation of Carver's eschewal of all varieties of literary trickery in favor of a native essentiality and authenticity. In the essay "On Writing," Carver explains how

Writers don't need tricks or gimmicks or even necessarily need to be the smartest fellows on the block. At the risk of appearing foolish, a writer sometimes needs to be able to just stand and gape at this or that thing--a sunset or an old shoe--in absolute and simple amazement. (*Fires* 23).

Carver explains how his ideas about literary trickery were learned from John Gardner in the essay "The Writer as Teacher": "Any strategy that kept important and necessary information away from the reader in the hope of overcoming him by surprise at the end of the story was cheating" (*Fires* 43).<sup>12</sup> The kinds of trickery referred to here have to do with plotting, surprise endings and

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<sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes writes, in *Writing Degree Zero*, that during those "moments when the writer follows languages which are really spoken, no longer for the sake of picturesqueness, but as essential objects which fully account for the whole content of society, writing takes as the locus of its reflexes the real speech of men" (80).

<sup>12</sup> Originally written as the Foreword for Gardner's posthumously published book, *On Becoming a Novelist*.

similar stratagems, but there is another form of writerly dishonesty which is an even greater sin in Carver's ethos of writing--not caring sufficiently about one's subjects or characters. Carver learned this lesson from Gardner as well, that "if the words and the sentiments were dishonest, the author was faking it, writing about things he didn't care about or believe in, then nobody could ever care anything about it" (45). Carver remained throughout his career fiercely committed to his origins, and to the kinds of people he lived among for most of his life. When John Alton asked Carver, in an interview conducted for the *Chicago Review* in 1986, about "the tremendous sympathy" he has for his characters, Carver replied that he could not be "condescending to those characters and [feel himself to be] any sort of writer at all" (156). Carver, as writer, sets himself, the reader, and the characters who inhabit his stories on an equal footing; there is no compact of irony between writer and reader, the reader is not provided by the narrative with any information pertinent to the story which the characters do not possess themselves. As Kim A. Herzinger puts it in the introduction to an issue of *The Mississippi Review* devoted to the subject of the new minimalist fiction, "reading is a conjugal act, an intimacy shared. Both parties must participate wholly, if the act is going to work" (15). In Bakhtinian terms, Carver's narrative method acknowledges that language is inherently dialogic--it only acquires its full resonance in its orientation towards another human being, a listener or a reader.

Carver's refusal to set himself, as author, in a position above his characters and readers is a manifestation of his desire to communicate to his readership news about the kinds of places in which he has lived. To Carver, the integrity of the writer is a function of the degree to which he remains honest in his depiction of characters and situations drawn from life. As Carver says in his essay "On Writing," "The real experimenters have to Make It New, as Pound urged, and in the process have to find things out for themselves. But if writers haven't taken leave of their senses, they also want to stay in touch with us, they want to carry news from their world to ours" (*Fires* 24). What the minimalist writer is trying to convey in such an attitude, according to Herzinger, is that "the world of experience (which includes literary experience) is, for better or worse, richer and more interesting than the world of literary experience alone" (16). In an interview with William L. Stull, conducted for *The Bloomsbury Review* in 1986, Carver explains that what he wants to communicate through his writing is about "matters of the heart, matters that are of concern and close to him" ("Matters of Life and Death" 190). To Carver, the task of literature is to bear witness to the existence of the world that the writer inhabits, to share his experience concerning the things which truly matter to him with a readership in the hope that, through the process of communication, a net gain in human understanding will result. In a book review from 1980, Carver states, "In fiction that matters the significance of the action inside

the story translates to the lives of the people outside the story" (*No Heroics, Please* 184).

And yet Carver was too deeply infected with the spirit of tragedy to presume that control comes with understanding, or that his writing could change anyone's life. Early on he came "to the hard realization that art doesn't make anything happen. . . . Maybe writing fiction about particular kinds of people living particular kinds of lives will allow certain areas of life to be understood a little better than they were understood before. But I'm afraid that's it, at least as far as I'm concerned" (Simpson and Buzbee 52). This refusal to speculate beyond the parameters of lived experience, beyond what the writer knows to be true, is what many see as Carver's greatest virtue as a writer. Morris Dickstein argues that it is the authenticity of the lived experience that Carver translates into fiction which separates him from the "trendy" minimalist writers who attempted to exploit the "newfound prestige" of the short story form:

What these writers largely missed in Carver was the social and emotional anchor of his work. Carver himself was something of a deadend character. Many of the blue-collar jobs he described, he himself had held. He could be as self-destructive, could feel as defeated, as anyone in his work. He knew from the inside the lives of auto mechanics and grocery clerks and recovering alcoholics. (510)

Carver's writing is based upon onto-theological concepts such as authenticity, honesty and integrity of purpose, and the communication it attempts concerns the emotional life of its characters rather than an effort on the part of its creator to make sense of the world they inhabit. In the interview with John Alton referred to above, Carver refuses to allow Alton to intellectualize his work. When Alton mentions E.L. Doctorow's comment that "the business of a writer is to record the movements of power in the writer's own time," Carver responds: "it works for him. And that's fine; that's what it's all about, making it work for you" (156-57). Although Carver himself would never use such fancy language to describe what he was doing as a writer, he respects the rights of others to practise their craft in whatever fashion works best for them. And as readers, we are free to see in the Carver chronotope the movements of power in time, or at least to infer from the behaviors of specific characters in specific times and places these movements.

## B. The Writer as Apprentice

In the Gardner essay, Carver confesses that

for as far back as I can remember, long before we moved to California in search of a different life and our slice of the American pie, I'd wanted to be a writer. I wanted to write, and I wanted to write anything . . . that involved putting words together to make something coherent and of interest to someone besides myself. . . . [Nobody] in my family had ever gone to college or for that matter had got beyond the mandatory eighth grade in high school. I didn't *know anything*, but I knew I didn't know anything. (*Fires* 40)

So Carver started his literary apprenticeship, taking writing courses at the small colleges he attended while simultaneously holding down a succession of entry-level jobs and trying to raise a young family. Carver's struggle as a young writer trying to find his own approach to his material is shown in the early stories collected in *No Heroics, Please*. There we can observe the young writer starting out on, and then rejecting, a number of different approaches. In "Furious Seasons," a "Faulknerian tale of incest and murder," Carver began working out Gardner's advice, reading all the Faulkner he could get his hands on, and then reading Hemingway to clean the Faulkner out of his system (Stull, Editor's Preface 17). In "The Aficionados," Carver does a devastating

Hemingway parody under the pseudonym John Vale. As Stull suggests, it is necessary to read this parody alongside "Pastoral," Carver's respectful reworking of "Big Two-Hearted River."<sup>13</sup>

"Bright Red Apples" is Carver's attempt to craft a fabulist fiction in the Barthelme/Hawkes vein. Even Tess Gallagher admits that it "doesn't seem to know what it's about" (Foreword 15). Finally, there is "The Hair," along with "Pastoral" one of the first of Carver's stories that we instantly recognize as a Carver story. I discuss this story in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

Carver's apprenticeship as a writer was a long one, and certainly complicated by the circumstances of his life. In the Gardner essay, Carver talks about how he endured: "I kept on writing long after 'good sense' and the 'cold facts'--the 'realities' of my life told me, time and again, that I ought to quit, stop the dreaming, quietly go ahead and do something else" (*Fires* 41). As Tobias Wolff puts it, in spite of all the hardships he suffered as a young writer, Carver "knew he was something special, had to have known it or he couldn't have survived all those years of almost nobody else knowing it" (248).

Carver survived as a writer by making his writing habits fit the circumstances of his life. He "limited [him]self to writing things [he] knew [he] could finish in one sitting, two sittings at the most . . . [and then] looked forward to the rewriting" (*Fires* 35). In the essay "On Rewriting," Carver talks about revision as messing

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<sup>13</sup> I thoroughly discuss the influence of Hemingway's writing on Carver in the next chapter.

around: "I'd rather tinker with a story after writing it . . . than have to write the story in the first place. That initial writing just seems to me the hard place I have to get to in order to go on and have fun with the story. . . . I revise because it gradually takes me into the heart of what the story is about" (*No Heroics, Please* 108-09).<sup>14</sup> Carver learned his love for the process of revision from John Gardner: "It was a basic tenet of his that a writer found what he wanted to say in the ongoing process of *seeing* what he'd said. And this seeing, or seeing more clearly, came about through revision" (*Fires* 43). Carver's single concession to the heroic model of the writer is tied up with the idea of the work itself, and the love of it which is evident in his comments on the process of revision. Roland Barthes states in *Writing Degree Zero* that with Flaubert, "labor replaces genius as value . . . there is a kind of ostentation in claiming to labor long and lovingly over the form of one's work" (63), and Carver has a lot invested in the idea of the value of literary labor.<sup>15</sup> In the poem "Balzac," Carver evokes a vision of the writer "in his nightcap after / thirty hours at his writing desk" (*Fires* 93), and you just know Carver envies those long stretches set aside for composition. In "Aspens" the poet imagines "a young man, alone . . . [scribbling] in a tenement with mice for company" (*Where Water Comes Together With Other*

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<sup>14</sup> This piece was originally written as the Afterword to the 1983 Capra edition of *Fires*.

<sup>15</sup> Carver's sympathy with Flaubert and his method of composition is brought out in the interview by McCaffery and Gregory. At one point Carver quotes a passage from Flaubert's letters: "The artist in his work must be like God in his creation--invisible and all powerful; he must be everywhere felt but nowhere seen" (109).



*Water* 40), and loves his bravery. And finally the poem "Work," dedicated to John Gardner, celebrates the love of the work itself: "The fullness before work. / The amazed understanding after" (*Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* 48). Given the lack of encouragement Carver received as a young writer, it is no wonder that he placed such emphasis on the process of the work itself rather than on whatever ends could be achieved through writing.

In a number of early stories, Carver depicts the tenuous nature of the young writer's vocation. One of these stories, "Put Yourself in My Shoes," is, according to Paul Skenazy, "the closest Carver ever comes to metafiction" (79). The writer-character in the story has recently quit his job in publishing "to write a novel" (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 130).<sup>16</sup> Myers (the same name Carver uses for the engineer father-character in "The Compartment," discussed in the final chapter here) is admired for his "nerve" by those he has left behind in the workplace. It is commonly assumed that all those occupations which bear even a tenuous connection to the literary world (teaching, public relations, advertising, publishing, etc.) attract a disproportionate number of aspiring writers, all seeking a steady source of income while they learn their craft. Of course, as a consequence of having to devote a considerable portion of their energies to their jobs,

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<sup>16</sup> In "The Paris Review Interview," Carver discusses how being fired from his job in publishing allowed him the financial freedom to write for a year (Simpson and Buzbee 45). It was about this time that Gordon Lish started to publish some of his stories in *Esquire* (Schumacher 234).

often these aspiring writers get very little actual writing done in their spare time, and become quite bitter and demoralized.

Myers's girlfriend, Paula, calls him from work to invite him to the office Christmas party.<sup>17</sup> She tells him that Larry Gudinas, "a tall, stooped man with wire-frame glasses," has committed suicide by shooting himself in the mouth (131). Myers imagines "the jolt, the head snapping back." Nothing is said about motivation, but the subject matter and the way the story unfolds suggest to the reader that perhaps this was one once-aspiring writer who could not bear the idea of one more day at work, perverting whatever talents he had once possessed in exchange for material comfort and security. Myers does not want to go to the party, despite the fact that his ex-boss, Carl, who "always talked of going to Paris to write a novel" (130), has asked for him repeatedly. Myers "was between stories, and he felt despicable" (132). The implication here is that a writer without a work in progress is nothing, a mechanism without a function. On the way to meet Paula at a bar, "he looked at the people who hurried along the sidewalks with shopping bags. He glanced at the gray sky, filled with flakes, and at the tall buildings with snow in the crevices and on the window ledges. He tried to see everything, save it for later." This is the writer as observer, capturing the

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<sup>17</sup> Carver discusses the origins of this story in the essay "On Writing": "I once sat down to write what turned out to be a pretty good story, though only the first sentence of the story had offered itself to me when I began it. For several days I'd been going around with this sentence in my head: 'He was running the vacuum cleaner when the telephone rang.' I knew there was a story there and that it wanted telling. . . . I sat down in the morning and wrote the first sentence, and other sentences promptly began to attach themselves" (*Fires* 26).

scene in his gaze and filing it away for later use. The scene has no intrinsic value, it is only when put to use in writing that it attains a functional value.<sup>18</sup>

At the bar Paula convinces Myers that they should visit the Morgans, whose house they had sublet when the Morgans were in Europe. The reader is prepared for possible confrontation when Myers asks if the visit is a good idea, given the "insulting letter" the Morgans had sent them when they heard Myers and Paula were keeping a cat in the house (133). The visit starts poorly. When Myers and Paula arrive, "a large bushy dog hurtled around the corner of the garage and headed straight for Myers" (134), who "fell onto the frozen grass with the dread certainty that the dog would go for his throat." Morgan later confesses to watching this scene from the front window, and "this remark seemed odd to Myers" (135), who is used to being the one doing the watching. Myers attempts to re-establish his tenuous sense of control over circumstance by studying Edgar and Hilda Morgan closely, but he cannot help but be aware that they are studying him too.

Once everyone settles in with a glass of rum and eggnog, the Morgans begin to relate a series of anecdotes, ostensibly as grist for Myers's fiction-mill. Alan Wilde notes that these three anecdotes "attribute to narrative a concern with the exceptional, the dramatic, and the consequent" (118), and that Myers rejects these concerns in creating "the banal account of ordinary life"

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<sup>18</sup> In "On Writing," Carver defines fiction as "the glimpse given life, turned into something that illuminates the moment" (*Fires* 26).

which the story both describes and is." The Morgans, as representatives of a privileged, professorial elite, are confident of their ability to control the interpretation of the stories they tell, to take a lofty, Tolstoyan narrative attitude. One line in particular proves too portentous for Myers ("Fate sent her to die on the couch in our living room in Germany" (146)), and he begins to laugh. This enrages Edgar Morgan, who says that if Myers was a real writer he would stop laughing and instead "plumb the depth of that poor soul's heart and try to understand" (147). As Myers continues to giggle, Edgar Morgan starts to relate the third anecdote, a thinly veiled account of how Myers and Paula abused their rights as tenants while the Morgans were away. This anecdote culminates with an accusation--that Myers has stolen Edgar Morgan's "two-volume set of 'Jazz at the Philharmonic'" (149). Myers' only defence is to laugh, and as he and Paula pull away in their car, her voice, describing the Morgans as "crazy" and "scary . . . seemed to come to him from a great distance. . . . He was silent and watched the road. He was at the end of a story" (150). Thus, although we never find out whether or not Myers did steal Morgan's records, we are shown a version of the writer as a kind of thief--someone who invades other people's lives and ransacks them for narrative material.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Literary theft can be "research," or it can be a form of homage. Jay McInerney recalls Carver saying about John Gardner that he "looked like a writer. . . . I tried to copy the way he walked. He used to let me work in his office because I didn't have a quiet place to work. I'd go through his files and steal the titles of his stories, use them on my stories" (124).

And yet, even if we acknowledge Myers to be presumptuous and invasive as a renter, we do not see him as overstepping any bounds as a writer. The narrative presents only the surfaces of things, and, as Arthur A. Brown observes, Myers' literary theft is necessary in order to reestablish the radically contingent identity of the writer figure (129-32). Alan Wilde tries to argue that Myers is an unpleasant and cruel character "whose confidence of superiority to his wretched hosts at least hints at Carver's treatment of his characters" (118), going against the grain of virtually everything that has ever been said about his attitudes towards the characters in his stories. What Wilde overlooks is the paradoxical inequality and circularity of the writer-academic relationship as it is played out in the story.<sup>20</sup> As Paul Skenazy observes, despite the fact that the writer does invade and temporarily possess "an environment that is not his and where he doesn't belong--first as housesitter, later as uninvited guest, afterwards as chronicler" (79), still the "writer and his wife live off the academics, care for as they abuse their property, and seem to provide just the sort of objects of scorn and disaster the Morgans need to make their own stories worth telling." Nobody comes out a clear winner in this story; instead, all are implicated

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<sup>20</sup> Carver writes of his ambivalent feelings towards the academic world in the poem "The Possible," which is collected in *Ultramarine*:

I spent years, on and off, in academe.  
 Taught at places I couldn't get near  
 as a student. But never wrote a line  
 about that time. Never. Nothing stayed  
 with me in those days. I was a stranger,  
 and an imposter, even to myself. (57)

in "a chain of voyeurism that extends beyond the depicted relationships and conversations to the reader."

Another early story about a writer-character is "How About This?" Harry, "thirty-two years old and . . . a writer in a way," has come from the city with his girlfriend Emily to see if he can find a "simpler life" in the country (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 185). Somehow he thinks that in the country he will be able to get into contact with "the essentials," to live "a more honest life," and to finish writing his first novel. But the first paragraph of the story indicates that this is not likely to happen:

All the optimism that had colored his flight from the city was gone now, had vanished the evening of the first day, as they drove north through the dark stands of redwood. Now, the rolling pasture land, the cows, the isolated farmhouses of western Washington seemed to hold out nothing for him, nothing he really wanted. He had expected something different. He drove on and on with a rising sense of disappointment and outrage. (183)

Harry, who "had always lived in cities" (185), is guilty of thinking that a change of place is going to change him, that out of the inessential environment of the city he might make himself into a real writer. But the truth of the country, its hardships and isolation, prove too much for Harry even before he has actually arrived. The romantic vision of the country, "coming out of the house with a wicker basket and pulling down large red apples,

still wet with the morning's dew" (188), is attractive to him, but once he is actually in the country he realizes that this vision is not true. The country life represents to a writer like Harry a commitment to the writerly virtues of solitude and self-reliance, and he is just not up to them:

He understood that it made him afraid. . . . He felt very calm really, all things considered. He wasn't going to stay here, he knew that, but it didn't upset him to know that now. He was pleased he knew himself so well. He would be all right, he decided. He was only thirty-two. Not so old. He was, for the moment, in a spot. He could admit that. After all, he considered, that was life, wasn't it? (191)

The writer here reveals himself to be a master of self-deception and rationalization, able to turn a failure, his inability to commit to a writer's life free of the distractions of the city, into a muted triumph of self-knowledge.

"The Augustine Notebooks" is the working title for a novel which Carver began in the late 1970s, and aborted after publishing a short excerpt in *The Iowa Review*.<sup>21</sup> It concerns another aspiring writer, Halprin, and a female companion who is not dignified with a name. They look, act and "even talk like broken-down Hemingway characters" (*No Heroics, Please* 66). On a tourist cruise of the Mediterranean, Halprin decides to cash in his ticket and to stay where he is in order to write a novel. He does

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<sup>21</sup> 10/3 (Summer 1979): 38-42.

not assume that his companion will want to stay with him, but she decides that she will, despite her feeling that they do not have "it" in them. At one point Halprin tries to explain his motivation to write:

My life is half over, more than half over. The only, the only really extraordinary thing to happen to me in, I don't know, years, was to fall in love with you. That's the only really extraordinary thing in years. That other life is over now, and there's no going back. I don't believe in gestures, not since I was a kid, before I married Kristina, but this would be a gesture of some sort, I suppose. (67)

The incoherence of Halprin's motivation for wanting to write reflects Carver's position during the period following the publication of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Carver had given up drinking and had gone through a long stretch when he simply could not write, after which he met Tess Gallagher.

In the story, Halprin is easily distracted from his work. The woman has little trouble convincing him that he has done "enough [work] for today" (70), and that he should give up the laborious job of literary composition for the seductive pleasures of the beach. Although it is tempting to read Halprin's decision to turn his back on his work and to turn to the more vital and authentic pleasures of the body in a positive light, the tone of the story does not allow this. A pall of depression hangs over this story, which I associate with the ambivalent feelings Carver had about being a



writer after he had finally quit drinking. As he told Roxanne Lawler in an interview in 1986, "When I got sober, I was so grateful to have my health back that it didn't matter if I ever wrote again or not" (174). Tess Gallagher suggests in the introduction to *Carver Country* that Carver might have blamed his writing for his drinking (17). And William Kittredge remembers Carver saying, in the early days of his sobriety, that he was not writing "Because [he couldn't] convince [himself] it [was] worth doing" (91). Significantly, all Halprin and his companion drink are lemon fixes.

The last of Carver's early stories which features a writer-figure is "The Pheasant," first published in a private edition in 1982, after the publication of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and collected in *Fires*. The main character, Gerald Weber, is described as an actor, but he seems so closely related to the marginal writer-characters in the three stories already discussed here that I feel justified in grouping them together. Furthermore, in an interview with Kay Bonetti from 1983, Carver talks about writing stories about writers, and in doing so justifies the decision I have made here: "I think every young writer is cautioned against writing a story about a writer. We're told to write about other things and other people. If you want to write a story about a writer, make him a painter or something" (61). Carver never did write a story about a painter, but he did write this story about an actor. Significantly, actors, like writers, can be considered a variety of storyteller.

Gerald Weber's identity seems every bit as tenuous as that of Myers in "Put Yourself in My Shoes." Weber and his older woman-friend, Shirley, who he has been using for her money and connections, are travelling up the coast from Los Angeles to her beach house. The story begins by describing Weber as not having "any words left in him" (*Fires* 165). Shirley is sleeping when Weber deliberately runs over a pheasant on the highway. When she wakes up, after he has stopped the car to check for damage, he asks her, "How well do you know me?" (167). She does not understand what has gotten into him, and he does not either: "It wasn't clear to him what he was asking, but he felt on the edge of something." Both acting and writing are activities where the subject must empty him or herself out in order to become someone else, and the strain of this can have severe ramifications for the subject's psychological health. An actor without a role is like a writer between stories--nothing. Weber remembers back to when he first met Shirley. He "was just out of graduate studies at UCLA . . . and, except for university theatre productions, an actor without a salaried role to his credit" (168). The young actor's situation is analagous to that of the young writer, fresh out of graduate school with only a few little magazine publications to his credit. But, as a result of Shirley's connections,

he'd landed a few minor roles. He could call himself an actor at long last, even if he didn't have more than a month or two month's work each year. The rest of the time, these last three years, he'd spent lying in the sun

near her pool, or at parties, or else running here and there with Shirley.

The artist figure here is someone who is dependent on others, both to get his break and to be provided with enough material comfort to pursue his artistic ambitions. Carver knows this situation quite well--he was supported materially by his wife through his early years of struggle as a student and writer, and he got his big break as a writer when his good friend Gordon Lish was made fiction editor at *Esquire* (one of the few American magazines to still pay good money for fiction), and then McGraw-Hill (where, according to legend, he made a condition of his employment the publication of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*).

After Weber tells Shirley that he hit the pheasant deliberately,

She gazed at him for a minute without any interest. She didn't say anything. Something became clear to him then. Partly, he supposed later, it was the result of the look of bored indifference she turned on him, and partly it was a consequence of his own state of mind. But he suddenly understood that he no longer had any values. No frame of reference, was the phrase that ran through his mind. (169)

As Arthur A. Brown points out, at this point "it is as though we hear the actor-character, as well as the narrator-writer, reflexively making life into fiction" (128). When Weber and Shirley take their leave of each other at a roadside restaurant, "He

felt as if they were doing a scene and this was the fifth or sixth take. But it still wasn't clear what was going to happen next" (170). Weber tells Shirley that he is "going to try and get [his] life in order" and to get a real job. Shirley says that he is "nothing" to her. Clearly this story is about an artist's crisis of faith and identity, an experience that Carver was all too familiar with through the lean years of his literary apprenticeship. In the essay "On Writing," Carver talks about how he "lost any great ambitions . . . in [his] late twenties" (*Fires* 22), when the dreary and pragmatic necessities of trying to provide for his family took precedence over his artistic ambitions: "There was always a wagonload of frustration to deal with--wanting to write and not being able to find the time or the place for it. . . . It was depressing, and I felt spiritually obliterated" (Simpson and Buzbee 37).

And yet Carver was able to survive, to live through his dark night of the soul and to come out the other side one of the most celebrated American writers of the 1980s. As Tobias Wolff says, endurance is the highest virtue in Carver's conceptual universe, the "rejection of the heroic and the lofty . . . goes to the heart of Ray's sense of life" (Halpert, *When We Talk About Raymond Carver* 7). In his preface to *Those Days*, a small-press collection of some of his earliest writing, Carver talks about his feelings about himself as a young writer:

The thing is, if a writer is still alive and well (and he's always well if he's still writing) and can look back

from a great distance to a few early efforts and not have to feel *too* abashed or discomfited, or even ashamed of what he finds he was doing then--then I say good for him. And good, too, whatever it was that pushed him along and kept him going. The rewards being what they are in this business, few enough and far between, he ought perhaps even be forgiven if he takes some little satisfaction in what he sees: a continuity in the work, which is of course to say, a continuity in the life. (quoted in Stull 469)<sup>22</sup>

This is not the voice of the young writer, struggling to learn his craft and to earn a living. This is the voice of the writer who has come through the struggle and is now assured "of his mastery, of his place in the canon, and his sense of where, given time, he might get to" (Davis 655). What Alan Davis terms the "luminous serenity" of the confident, mature writer is evident in Carver's later works.

In collaborating with Tess Gallagher on a screenplay based on the life of Fyodr Dostoevsky, Carver was able to finally try his hand at a single work of novelistic length and scope. The

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<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to compare Carver's attitude here to Thomas Pynchon's in his introduction to *Slow Learner*, the collection of his early stories: "My first reaction, rereading these stories, was *oh my God*, accompanied by physical symptoms we shouldn't dwell upon. My second thought was about some kind of wall-to-wall rewrite. These two impulses have given away to one of those episodes of middle-aged tranquillity, in which I now pretend to have reached a level of clarity about the young writer I was back then. I mean I can't very well just 86 this guy from my life. On the other hand, if through some as yet undeveloped technology I were to run into him today, how comfortable would I feel about lending him money, or for that matter even stepping down the street to have a beer and talk over old times?" (3)

completed script was 220 pages long, according to Michael Cimino, the director who had commissioned the project, the longest screenplay he had ever seen ("On the Dostoevsky Screenplay," *No Heroics, Please* 114). The screenplay project is interesting for a number of reasons,<sup>23</sup> but foremost among them is the potential suggested to Carver in the kind of research-based writing he and Gallagher did on the project. This was a radical departure from the kinds of writing Carver had built his reputation on, and it suggests, along with his final published story, "Errand," about the death of Chekhov, the direction his work was taking when he was overcome by cancer in 1988.<sup>24</sup> Dostoevsky and "Errand" mark the end of the large novelistic work which I might suggest we call Raymond Carver's *America*, and the beginning of a new stage in his career.

But this new stage of Carver's writing never really got a chance to get going, and what we are left with is, for all intents

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<sup>23</sup> In the screenplay, Carver and Gallagher focus on a number of dramatic episodes which seem to have some connection to Carver's life--most significantly the death sentence which divides Dostoevsky's life in two (just as Carver's quitting drinking marks the start of his second life), his gambling addiction, and the relationship with the stenographer who became his second wife and "saw to it that Dostoevsky's last years, the period of *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, were years of peace and tranquillity" (*No Heroics, Please* 115).

<sup>24</sup> Douglas Unger was at the Yaddo writer's retreat when "Errand" first appeared in *The New Yorker*. He recalls how "James Salter noticed that the death scene in the [Henri Troyat] biography [of Chekhov] and a large part of the death scene in "Errand" were almost exactly alike. . . . Ray had read the biography, was fascinated by it, and had decided to use it when he got the idea for his story. To his mind, it was no different than using parts of a story one of his friends had told him around the table. . . . He laughed at how someone had actually caught him at it, then said he might just do the same kind of story with the biographies of other writers he admired, like de Maupassant, Dostoyevski and Kafka" (Halpert, "Glimpses" 298).

and purposes, what I have been calling the Carver chronotope. The figure of the writer is at the centre of the chronotope--it is the site of struggle and decision concerning the legitimacy of various ways of perceiving the world, and turning these perceptions into literary representation. The figure of the writer in the Carver chronotope is a humble, self-effacing one, and when faced with the inhuman complexity of late capitalist reality, the writer deliberately chooses to restrict his discourse to include only what he thinks he knows. In the epigraph to the poem "Harley's Swans," Carver quotes part of a letter by Sherwood Anderson: "A man has to begin over and over--to try and think and feel only in a very limited field, the house on the street, the man at the corner drug store" (*Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* 83). Graham Clarke describes Carver's method as one that brings to bear all his intelligence and literary skill upon "a self-consciously limited area of attention in order to achieve as particular a realization as possible of individual marks and spaces" (104-05). And yet all these particularities, taken in their totality, add up to a single remarkable work which captures, in its relentless evocation of surfaces, the mood of the America of the 1970s. The Carver chronotope is not heroic or utopian because the times which it documents were not. It is a socially committed literature, even if it does not attempt to do anything concrete in the real world, and it is also an experimental, avant-garde literature, as I will demonstrate in the fourth chapter. Ann-Marie Karlsson's perspective from Scandinavia, free of the tribal obligations of

North American and British critics, argues that the minimalist (she calls it hyperrealist) writing of Carver and his contemporaries can be understood as "a fiction of effacement . . . which has internalized ideas of marxism, feminism and post-structuralism and chooses to express the ideas implicitly in its silences rather than explicitly" (153). Carver's fiction does not represent a "willful underdeployment of resources" (Newman 93); rather, it represents the guarded deployment of resources utterly appropriate to the particular situation of a particular writer working in a particular historical moment. In the words of Jay Kaar, who knew Carver when he was just starting out in Arcata, California, the stories are "a true extrapolation" which captures "the daemon" of a time and place (29). In other words, they form a chronotope, a zone of maximal contact which concretely evokes in readers an intuitive understanding of a time and a place.



### **III. Wilderness and the Natural in Hemingway and Carver: Degradation of the Idyll**

"When the immanent unity of time disintegrated, when individual life-sequences were separated out, lives in which the gross realities of communal life had become merely petty private matters; when collective labor and the struggle with nature had ceased to be the only arena for man's encounter with nature and the world--then nature itself ceased to be a living participant in the events of life. Then nature became, by and large, a 'setting for action,' its backdrop; it was turned into landscape, it was fragmented into metaphors and comparisons serving to sublimate individual and private affairs and adventures not connected in any real or intrinsic way with nature itself."

-M.M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." (217).

#### **A. Wilderness and the Natural**

The concept of wilderness is central to much of American literature, both classic and contemporary. It is important as a setting that engages many of the themes that are of central concern to many American writers working in a certain uniquely American tradition. But the wilderness is not only a spatial

phenomenon, it also has temporal aspects. The place that is the wilderness exists in a special kind of wilderness-time, distinct from other sorts of literary time. The Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope, "a formally constitutive category of literature" in which "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (84), offers a starting point for thinking about the role of the wilderness in recent American fiction. The concept of the chronotope takes into account how time "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible . . . [and] space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (84). The particular aspect of the Carver chronotope we are concerned with here is the wilderness idyll. The wilderness idyll, in its most general form, has to do with the unity of folkloric time, "the special relationship that time has to space in the idyll: an organic fastening down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one's own home" (225). Everything that exists in the idyllic world follows from the uniqueness of wilderness space and time. Origins, destinies and the quotidian aspects of existence all meld into each other in a kind of paradisaal unity--the idyllic world is a prelapsarian world.

The argument which will be made here is not predicated upon the existence of such a pure form of the idyll as this in American literature, not even in so-called classic American literature. The wilderness idyll in American literature is already

corrupt when it makes its first appearances. It must be because Americans, as a people, do not have an autochthonous relationship to their landscape, their origins are not as firmly rooted in place as those of an aboriginal people. According to current theories, all the inhabitants of the Americas have come from somewhere else, although the aboriginal peoples of the Americas have been here long enough for them to be considered as, in essence, native to the continent.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding what we know concerning the migration of Asian peoples across a Siberian land-bridge during the last few glacial periods, for all intents and purposes the aboriginal peoples of the Americas consider their relationship to their landscape to be autochthonous, as is evidenced in the mythologies of virtually all American native cultures. Native literature and mythology partakes of the wilderness idyll in a very deep and authentic fashion as a result. However, canonical, classic American literature suffers from an *a priori* alienation from the full depth which the wilderness idyll makes possible because its origins are so definitely European rather than American. American literature cannot access the "unity of place in the life of generations [which] weakens and renders less distinct all the temporal boundaries between individual lives and between various phases of one and the same life" (225) because it can

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<sup>1</sup> Whether or not any peoples are truly native to any particular place is a problem for anthropologists. The history of the world is the history of the movements of peoples across the face of the earth, but practically speaking those peoples who have occupied a certain place for so long (as the Nisga'a say, "since time immemorial") that their actually coming there has been forgotten may be considered native to that place.

never be forgotten that as a people Americans do not have their ultimate origins in the landscapes where they live and die as individuals. The emphases on mobility and individualism in American thinking also serve to subvert the wilderness idyll. Individual writers have attempted to create American mythologies, but their alienation from the origins of the idyll, an intuitive understanding of which is necessary to the existence of a true mythology, serves to ensure that in an ultimate sense American literature always participates in the destruction of the idyll. The context of American literature is primarily historical, but it is in the deconstruction of the wilderness idyll that American literature most closely approaches the mythological, or at least gestures towards it.

In his seminal work of thematic criticism, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler locates two important features of the wilderness idyll. The first of these involves geographical space: in America the idyllic is always located in the West (355). Civilization, the combination of forces which work in opposition to the American wilderness idyll, proceeded from the east, always chasing the idyll, which retreated ahead of it. The second feature has to do with the psychology of the American wilderness idyll. In American literature the wilderness idyll is usually associated with values of maleness; the West is an "earthly paradise for men only" (355). Obviously these two features of the American wilderness represent deep corruptions of the spirit of the idyll. The first, which figures the flight of an ephemeral wilderness across the

landscape of the continent, barely keeping ahead of progress, allows for neither the stability through time nor the physical fixing of location which are conditions fundamentally necessary to the existence of a true wilderness idyll. The second, the separation of male and female values by a crude wilderness/civilization dichotomy, makes the transmission of the values of the wilderness idyll, such as it exists, from generation to generation, a patrilineal phenomenon, which is a corruption of the organic unity of the true wilderness idyll, in which men and women participate equally in the wholeness of natural life.

## **B. The Wilderness Idyll in Hemingway's Stories**

Ernest Hemingway is to many people the American modernist master of fiction in the minimalist mode. In the Nick Adams stories Hemingway uses the wilderness idyll, which he inherited from the writers who preceded him in the American realist tradition, to bring to life the possibilities for stability in the lives of characters living in an age of rapid and violent change. The ways in which he uses the idyllic wilderness then becomes a new baseline, which writers like Raymond Carver must contend with when they follow him into similar landscapes. The two part story "Big Two-Hearted River" is the cosmic centre of the Nick Adams stories taken as an artistic unity, and its trope of the return to a sacred place of youth becomes a powerful figure which

has to be reckoned with by all who work this terrain following him. The river itself is the central symbol of the idyllic in the form which Hemingway gives it. As Fiedler observes, the river "is always different and always the same" (356). When Nick Adams arrives at the place where his solitary fishing expedition begins in the first part of "Big Two-Hearted River," he finds only the stone "foundations of the Mansion House hotel . . . chipped and split by the fire" (163) which had destroyed the town of Seney in his absence. Nick sees "the burned-over stretch of hillside, where he had expected to find the scattered houses of the town. . . ." There is hardly a trace of the many structures that supported the rudiments of a frontier civilization based on primary resource extraction at this place. The town-site is slowly reverting back to the wilderness from which it sprang, although it would be a mistake to interpret this gesture on the part of its former inhabitants, their giving up on this place, as anything but a strictly cold-hearted economic decision. The wilderness is only allowed to reclaim a territory once man is finished with it, after there is no lumber left standing or mineral wealth left unmined in the ground. If there was money in it the town would have been rebuilt. The people and the town they built to live in are gone, but the river is still there.

The obsessive concern of the narrator for the existence of this river is emphasized by the apparent redundancy of his calling the reader's attention to it repeatedly. In the second paragraph, even after Nick is guided to "the bridge over the river," which

surely presumes the existence of the river underneath, the narrator still pauses to confirm this fact in a declarative sentence of stunning simplicity: "The river was there" (163). The river is an emblem of permanence, but in the postwar world of the story ideas of permanence and stability are beginning to come under attack from the newly emerged ideological consequences of Einstein's theory of relativity. A river is only permanent relative to phenomena that are less so; a river will sometimes change course on its own, under the influence of geostructural forces at work in its location. Furthermore, a river can be altered or even destroyed as a consequence of man's desire to control a landscape for political and economic reasons. But the river upon which the whole story is predicated in this instance is still here, and we can feel the relief that Nick Adams feels when this is finally confirmed. Who knows what might have happened if Nick had stepped off the train to find a dry riverbed? If he is a "sentimental" man, like his father ("Fathers and Sons" 370), perhaps the absence of the river would be betrayal enough to drive Nick to take his own life, as his father did before him. The river keeps alive a connection to a past world, and in the simplicity of this world Nick hopes to find some kind of relief from the trials of the world he is trying to escape.

It is not just the river that allows Nick to connect with his past, it is also what lives in the river. The river is full of beautiful trout: "It was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and seen trout" (163). The sight of the large trout at the bottom of the

pool under the bridge reassures Nick that there is indeed a chance for some sort of redemption for him here. His heart tightens and he feels "the old feeling" (164). The reader just knows that this is a good feeling. The figure that the fish cuts connects him to an earlier period in his life, when the vision of a bass arcing through the air was enough to convince him of his immortality ("Indian Camp" 70), or at least when such visions were the clearcut price of mortality, where the excruciating poignance of certain moments of existence made the idea of death something which could be lived with.

The fish functions as both ally and adversary for Nick. He identifies with the fish--it is he and the fish against all those who do not understand the wilderness ethos--and yet he also seeks to destroy it in order to affirm his own power. But the true fisherman, of which Nick Adams is an example, does not hate his adversary, he does not get angry when a fish fights hard to evade capture, instead he respects its quiet power and self-sufficiency. Fiedler says the story is all about "the ritual murder of fish" (357), which seems to me inaccurate in that Fiedler suggests something indiscriminate, cruel and perverse. There are certainly elements of ritualized behavior present in fishing as an activity, and some fish are killed, but this is not the point.<sup>2</sup> Fishing like Nick does here is not an entirely goal-oriented activity; in fact, one could

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<sup>2</sup> As Mark A.R. Facknitz explains in his essay "Raymond Carver and the Rediscovery of Human Worth," this kind of killing in the wilderness is based on a principle which "ought to be self-evident to an American man: hunting [and fishing are] not war" (289). Butchering and eating the animal justify the creature's fear and death.



argue that the actual process of fishing, of being there in the wilderness, is what it is about. The respect and care which Nick shows towards this place, with no one around to either applaud or censure his behavior,<sup>3</sup> demonstrates the depth of the connection he feels towards it. He feels responsible for the wilderness because he feels he is a part of it, not an intruder. The deliberateness of his actions suggests ritual, as when he rolls the log back over the place where he collects "a bottle full of good grasshoppers" (174), a model in miniature for the sustainability of a resource.<sup>4</sup> Nick only takes as much of something as he needs, and knows that because of this restraint there will be more there when he needs more. The baiting of the hook itself also suggests ritual in the care that Nick takes to do it properly: "Nick took him [the grasshopper] by the head and held him while he threaded the thin hook under his chin, down through his thorax and into the last segments of his abdomen" (175). Although some might detect a degree of cruelty, or even sadism in the coolness with which such a procedure is described, it is important to remember the context of these actions. This is the wilderness after all, and a certain amount of what so-called civilized human beings might

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<sup>3</sup> In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow characterizes moral behavior in an urban, bourgeois setting as dependent upon the threat of external censure by others. Addressing his audience on the *Nellie*, Marlow asks them how they can hope to understand Kurtz: "How could you?--with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbors ready to cheer you on or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows, and lunatic asylums. . ." (85). The only thing that can govern a person's behavior in a wilderness setting is a "capacity for faithfulness" that has nothing to do with public opinion.

<sup>4</sup> The young Nick Adams, in "The Last Good Country," finds bait under the same log, deep in the woods, three years in a row (529).

deem physical cruelty is inherent in its primal economy of predator relationships. The important thing is that Nick is always aware of precisely what he is doing, and in doing things correctly he aspires to keep the level of pain that he inflicts on even so lowly a creature as a grasshopper as minimal as possible.

That Nick is not interested in murdering fish, or inflicting unnecessary pain upon them, is evident in the care he takes in releasing the first small trout he catches:

He had wet his hand before he touched the trout, so he would not disturb the delicate mucus which covered him. If a trout was touched with a dry hand, a white fungus attacked the unprotected spot. Years before when he had fished crowded streams, with fly fishermen ahead of him and behind him, Nick had again and again come upon dead trout, furry with white fungus, drifted against a rock, or floating belly up in some pool. Nick did not like to fish with other men on the river. Unless they were of your party, they spoiled it. (176)

Nick respects the good fight that the little trout has put up, and he wants it to survive and to learn from this experience, so that the next person who hooks this fish will really have to work to bring him in. Unfortunately, Nick cannot be assured that the next guy who hooks this trout will be one of those who will truly appreciate what he is a part of: he might be one of the sloppy, careless hobbyists who litter the banks with garbage. Fishing is not a

communal activity for Nick--it is difficult to find others who respect the sanctity of the wilderness as he does. Certainly the hobbyists who drive out from the city on weekends lack a real sense of connection to the wilderness as a special place. They only think of fishing as an occasion for shedding some of the restrictions of their civilized, urban lives, as an escape from responsibility rather than entering a place that entails new, even more rigorous ones. Although the strain of misanthropy that Nick shows in his attitudes towards other fisherman is not in itself an attribute of the wilderness idyll, certainly the whole issue of in and out groups, of belonging, is. These people, whom Nick hates, are not of the place, so Nick feels that they do not deserve to partake of its riches. They are the other, and he would as soon have them dead as see them defile his streams.

After releasing the small trout, Nick moves into deeper water, where he knows he will find the big fish. It does not take long for him to hook a big one, and in his battle with the big fish we can observe the existence of a special kind of time which binds fisherman and adversary together in their struggle. In the excitement of the fight, time seems to slow down as the mind/body duality which permeates the consciousness of post-Cartesian man is subtly annihilated--Nick enters what athletes refer to as the zone, a place where one is completely within oneself, and not subject to the kinds of externalization and alienation that corrode everyday life. Nick acts automatically, without thinking, and then makes sense of his actions afterwards.

He feels "the moment when the strain [is] too great" (176) and knows the leader will break. He knows this with a certainty that hardly applies to anything else in his life, a certainty that originates in experience and comes into his mind through his gut, rather than the other way around. And yet, despite the fact that he knows the leader will break, when the moment comes and it actually does what he knew it would, he still reacts viscerally to his disappointment--his mouth goes dry, his hands shake, he feels "vaguely, a little sick, as though it would be better to sit down" (177). In his moment of defeat his thoughts move from himself to his adversary:

He thought of the trout somewhere on the bottom, holding himself steady over the gravel, far down below the light, under the logs, with the hook in his jaw. Nick knew the trout's teeth would cut through the snell of the hook. The hook would imbed itself in his jaw. He'd bet the trout was angry. Anything that size would be angry. That was a trout. He had been solidly hooked. Solid as a rock. He felt like a rock, too, before he started off. By God, he was a big one. By God, he was the biggest one I ever heard of.

We can see in Nick's meditation upon the fish a great respect for its power and dignity. Fiedler sees "a disguised prayer . . . uttered in the guise of a childish epithet" (356) here as affirmation of the ritual, but what is the essence of the ritual which Nick Adams hopes to affirm? Fiedler asserts that the "ritual murder of fish

conceals . . . the occasion for immersion which is essential to the holy marriage of males. Water is the symbol of the barrier between the Great Good Place and the busy world of women . . ." (357). There is certainly much to be said for this approach, although Fiedler somewhat simplifies things for rhetorical effect, and to fit his assertions to critical notions which were more fashionable at the time that he was writing his study than they are now. Although Nick is alone on this particular fishing expedition, it is interesting to note that his adversaries, the fish he tries to catch, are always referred to with the male pronoun. In addition, the fish can also be understood to represent the male principle in various ways, although I would deny that it is anything as simple or obvious as a phallic symbol. Even if it partakes of all the attributes associated with the phallus there is more to it than that. But Nick has not always been alone on his trips into the wilderness--at the end of the first part of "Big Two-Hearted River" Nick reminisces about a previous fishing expedition when he did have friends with him. Hopkins was someone whom Nick "argued about everything with" (168), even making coffee. Their trip to the Black River was broken up by a telegram to Hopkins which informed him that "his first big well had come in" (169). Hopkins leaves his companions, Nick and Bill, things "to remember him always by." They make elaborate plans to go fishing again next summer, but Nick "never saw Hopkins again." Hopkins disappears into the "serious" world of business and finance, lorded over by "his real girl," the one that "none of

them would make fun of." It is this serious world that Nick is trying to escape by returning to the wilderness, and although it is too simple perhaps to characterize this world as "the busy world of women," there can be no doubt that women are a part of the complications that make life in this world so problematic.

The idyllic nature of the wilderness, even in the debased form it takes here, provides Nick with a meaningful alternative to the space-time of the serious world; it allows him the room and the leisure to strip life of all unnecessary confusion, to try and reduce it to its essence. It is a strangely paradoxical place, one which deals with essences, and must therefore be understood as theological, or at least onto-theological, and yet access to this world of essences is attained through the body and its relations to very specific places and activities rather than through the operation of the spirit and any kind of universality. Nick's muscles ache with an exertion they have grown unaccustomed to, and yet this aching is understood to be good. It feels good to ache in this way, which is a completely honest acknowledgement of the body's proper functioning, as opposed to the vague kinds of ache that one is subject to in the serious world of the city, where it is one's spirit that aches with existential dread and confusion. Nick is happy that he has "left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs" (164). There is an almost magical quality to the simplicity of survival in the wilderness; everything is familiar, and this allows Nick to operate more by instinct than by thinking: "He did not need to get his map out. He knew where he was from

the position of the river" (165). In the wilderness one lives in the moment--the past and future do not threaten with their presence, instead being parts of what is the present. As a boy in the woods Nick "had already learned there was only one day at a time and that it was always the day you were in" ("The Last Good Country" 539). The young Nick thinks "a lot of trouble" (530) would have been saved if he had been born an Indian. He figures that then he would have an authentic claim to a life in this land, to live in the eternal present of the wilderness rather than having to pursue a life in the larger world beyond the ancient forest, where he will have to synchronize himself with the mechanical and divided time of civilization, where he will have to think about things the rest of his life (541). The kinds of thinking and talking that are the very currency of the larger world are foreign to the wilderness. As George says to Nick Adams in "Cross-Country Snow," some things are "too swell to talk about" (145).

It is possible, in the uncluttered mindscape that the wilderness opens up for Nick, to take real pleasure in small things. The smell of the sweet fern that Nick has put under his pack straps is good (165). When he lies down for a nap, "the earth [feels] good against his back" (166). In the wilderness one rests when one is tired, or simply when one wants to, rather than arranging things according to a schedule which reflects the priorities of a system rather than those of the individual. Similarly, the routine process of putting up his tent is satisfying to Nick in its very simplicity:

Inside the tent the light came through the brown canvas. Already there was something mysterious and homelike. Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it. Now he was hungry. (167)

There is nothing abstract about what Nick does or how he thinks about it. He makes a place where he can feel safe, and the mystery is inherent in just how simple it is to do this if one has access to the ethos of the wilderness idyll; that is, if one knows where one is and what one is doing. It is impossible not to sense how grateful Nick is to be settled, and how deeply he needs to feel safe. There is a sense of prayer in the liturgical simplicity of the short sentences that Nick speaks to himself, a pagan prayer to the place where he is making his home, "the good place." In this place even his appetite is enhanced: "He did not believe he had ever been hungrier." Obviously a certain amount of this hunger is strictly due to the physical exertion of the day, the fact that he "had not eaten since a cup of coffee and a ham sandwich in the station restaurant at St. Ignace" (168), but one senses there is more to it than this. In the safety and tranquillity of the



wilderness Nick is able to allow his body all that it needs: "He had been that hungry before, but had not been able to satisfy it." The food itself is unremarkable; it is not that it is in itself superior to the food he might eat elsewhere. But here, in this place, after the labors of this day, there is a sense that Nick really deserves this food, and perhaps a sense that appetite operates more efficiently the less it has to do with conscience or consciousness.

The return of a healthy appetite is one indicator of the most important aspect of the wilderness idyll in this story, the aspect of healing. Based on its position in the fictional-chronological sequence of the Nick Adams stories, readers generally assume that "Big Two-Hearted River" takes place some time after Nick returns from serving in the First World War. It is also generally taken as a given that Nick is thus a representative of a literary, socio-historical construct, the so-called "Lost Generation," members of which are all, as individuals, in dire need of some sort of healing from the psychic wounds they suffered from the horrors and atrocities of that war. According to Fiedler, for Hemingway the war becomes "a convenient tag for the failure of values and faith which converted a generation of young American writers [and by extension, young Americans in general, if we acknowledge that the plight of the writers reflects the plight of their society at the time in question] to self-hatred, bravado, and expatriation" (346). Nick has survived both the horrors of the war and immersion in the decadence of the postwar Europe of the twenties, but in order to be whole again, to be truly healed, he

must return to the rivers of his youth. During the war, when Nick lay wounded on the floor of a makeshift hospital, it was the idea of the river idyll which lent him the strength to survive. He was afraid to sleep, for he was sure if he closed his eyes, his "soul would go out of [his] body" ("Now I Lay Me" 276), so he occupied himself instead by fishing the whole length "of a trout stream [he] had fished along when [he] was a boy . . . very carefully in [his] mind." He remembered in great detail all the different kinds of bait he would use and where he would find them.

Sometimes I would fish four or five different streams in the night; starting as near as I could get to their source and fishing them down stream. When I had finished too quickly and the time did not go, I would fish the stream over again, starting where it emptied into the lake and fishing back up stream, trying for all the trout I'd missed coming down. Some nights too I made up streams, and some of them were very exciting, and it was like being awake and dreaming. Some of those streams I still remember and think that I have fished in them, and they are confused with streams I really know. I gave them all names and went to them on the train and sometimes walked for miles to get to them. (277)

Nick finds comfort in recalling the joys and disciplines he practised as a boy, fishing the holy waters of the streams that flowed through the wilderness which surrounded the little outpost

of civilization where he lived with his family. This thinking about fishing, almost a dreaming, is the pagan equivalent to the prayers he says on the nights he cannot fish. But the pagan equivalent seems superior to the Christian prayer, for when he tries to pray for all the people he had ever known, memories arise which reveal the ambivalence of the relationship between his mother and his father, which in turn recalls the confusion he felt as a boy when confronted with this. Fiedler sees in Nick's choosing to go squirrel hunting with his father after his mother has sent for him in "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" (76) an act of "symbolic matricide"; the mother is seen as "a monster of piety, who despises the great clean outdoors of rod and gun, and rises from her copy of *Science and Sanity* to destroy Father's collection of Indian artifacts while he is off teaching junior to shoot" (331). This act on the part of his mother, "cleaning things out and making a good clearance" ("Now I Lay Me" 278), is accomplished with smiles and superficial civility, but below the surface Nick senses a strong female aggressive impulse at work, a veiled threat to his masculinity, as it is projected through the figure of the father, from which Nick recoils as less than honest and straightforward. The superficial cleanliness of his mother's housekeeping and her Christian, bourgeois values are contrasted with the absolute purity of fresh running water. In the story "Summer People," Nick gets down on the ground in order to put his "arm down into the spring" (496), an act that occurs between the town of Horton's Bay and

the lake where he is going swimming with friends.<sup>5</sup> He cannot hold his arm there very long because of the cold, but he wishes he "could put all of [himself] in there," because he thinks such immersion would "fix" him, cure him of his desire to practise the casual hypocrisy of the world. Specifically, he wants the cold, clean water to wash away his sense of guilt about betraying his friend Odgar. He cannot stop himself from thinking about Odgar and Kate together, and yet he knows that given the opportunity he will probably betray Odgar again in order to be with Kate: "Thinking was no good. It started and went on so" (497). Nick wants the water to transform him into something better, something which would not be so self-conscious, so wracked by feeling. He wishes he could be a fish himself (499)<sup>6</sup> so he might live immersed in the pure aquatic element, thus avoiding the

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<sup>5</sup> In the title-poem from the collection "Where Water Comes Together With Other Water," Carver suggests a similarly religious attitude towards fresh water:

I love creeks and the music they make.  
 And rills, in glades and meadows, before  
 they have a chance to become creeks.  
 I may even love them best of all  
 for their secrecy. I almost forgot  
 to say something about the source!  
 Can anything be more wonderful than a spring?  
 But the big streams have my heart too.  
 And the places streams flow into rivers.  
 The open mouths of rivers where they join the sea.  
 The places where water comes together  
 with other water. Those places stand out  
 in my mind like holy places. (17)

<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, young Edmund Tyrone, in Eugene O'Neill's play *Long Day's Journey into Night*, says, "It was a great mistake, my being born a man, I would have been much more successful as a seagull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death!" (812) In both cases merging with the natural order of things is seen as the only worthwhile alternative to an alienated, civilized existence.

myriad complications that occur in the dry, complicated social world.

In "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick returns to this pagan, holy place to heal, to recapture the simplicity and honesty that he can only attain in close proximity to fresh water, in the midst of the wilderness idyll. As Fiedler points out, Nick "is haunted by a sense of how simple it all was once" (317), and adds that his acceptance of "innocent and inconsequential sex . . . camouflages the rejection of maturity and of fatherhood itself."<sup>7</sup> The original wound which is Nick's sexuality, arising as it did amidst the confusion he felt as a witness to the ambivalence of the relationship between his mother and his father, and then cut off before any resolution could be reached by his father's suicide, is deepened by his wartime experiences. Like a wounded animal, Nick returns to the only safe place he knows in order to tend to his wound. He knows he will be healed when he can bring himself to enter the swamp, a dark, cavernous, complex and female presence compared to the male clarity of the open stream. He knows he is not ready to go into the swamp just yet: "Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them" (180). In the wilderness there is a surplus of time--nothing

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<sup>7</sup> This rejection is clearest in the story "Fathers and Sons," where Nick Adams and his son visit the old town, and the son's insistent questions inspire Nick to muse about his relationship with Trudy, the Indian girl who had initiated him sexually. At the end of an embarrassingly over-written paragraph, Nick sums up his attitude towards sex with unintentionally comic intensity: "Long time ago good. Now no good" (375-76).

beyond attending to the basic needs of survival is so important that it must be done right away. Nick will bide his time, preparing himself carefully before he will enter the swamp, for he will need all his strength to confront what it contains.

In the short fiction of Ernest Hemingway, the idyllic wilderness provides the characters who inhabit it, or who live on its margins, and even those who once lived close to it, with a reprieve from the busy, mechanical space-time of the larger world where people exist subject to nebulous historical forces that seem far beyond their control as individuals. The wilderness is also beyond human control in an ultimate sense; even if it can be altered by man it can never be completely brought into submission. Specific areas of wilderness may be destroyed or civilized, but wilderness as a generic entity will always exist out there somewhere. And yet, despite the fact that the wilderness, like the moronic inferno of the city, is ultimately beyond the control of the individual, within the context of the wilderness it is possible for one to clearly recognize the limits of his control, and to observe the physical, immediate results of this control. For a character such as Nick Adams, who grew up on the margins of the wilderness, it remains always a place of psychic refuge, a place which can offer some comfort merely by its existence as a memory, but which must be physically reentered for the healing of serious wounds. Still, the wilderness idyll as it appears in the Nick Adams stories lacks the Bakhtinian "unity of place in the life of generations" which would allow for the ultimate healing of

one's alienation, or which would prevent such a state of being, because the true idyll obscures the "boundaries between individual lives and between various phases of . . . the same life."

Nick's wilderness is someplace he returns to alone. The construction of the wilderness as a male place in the Nick Adams stories makes this primal loneliness inevitable, and keeps the characters who live in it from coming to a full appreciation of their place in the wholeness of natural life. The Indians who appear intermittently in the Nick Adams stories once lived in harmony with the land and with themselves, but after hundreds of years of contact with white civilization their way of life has been deeply compromised. Most of the wilderness in the northern Michigan of Nick's youth is second-growth forest, all the big trees having been cut down to build the towns and cities of this new, North American civilization. Some of these towns stuck and grew, while others were reclaimed by the wilderness once they were abandoned by their occupants. In the unfinished, late story "The Last Good Country," a young Nick Adams and his sister penetrate deep into a pocket of virgin, old-growth forest to escape a couple of game wardens who have it in for Nick. Nick and his sister have to pass through a logged-out area, full of slash piles that offend their sensibilities, to get away, but all that ugliness is forgotten when they enter the old forest itself, where "the trunks of the trees rose sixty feet high before there were any branches" (516). They both feel "strange" here; Nick says, "Like the way I ought to feel in church." This is the true wilderness, a living holy place,

where the real native spirit of the Americas dwells in ancient hemlock forests. The strangeness that Nick and his sister feel here indicates that they are not of this place in the most important sense--they are not autochthonous of this earth where they stand. And yet this is the place where they belong more than any other, given that the identity and location of the place they should belong to has become obscured by history--the living link of Adamses living in one specific geographical space has been broken by their migration to the new world. So this is about as good as it gets in America--a couple of generations in roughly the same spot is having roots. Nick tells his sister: "This is good for you. This is the way forests were in the olden days. This is about the last good country there is left. Nobody gets in here ever." By the time Nick returns to the wilderness after the war, such places are even more rare. But people are infinitely adaptable, and will always find comfort in whatever remnants of wilderness are left to them. Just as the grasshoppers in "Big Two-Hearted River" have "all turned black from living in the burned-over land" (165), Nick has been changed by the places in which he has lived since he left his idyllic wilderness, but given time he knows that both he and the grasshoppers might find their natural color.



### C. Carver Rewriting Hemingway: Idyllic Wilderness in "Pastoral"/"The Cabin"

From the earliest reviews of Raymond Carver's first collection of stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, his debt to the fiction of Ernest Hemingway has been noted. Dean Flower went so far as to suggest that Carver was "a descendant of Hemingway, relocated in the Pacific Northwest" (281).<sup>8</sup> Although such statements initially strike one as accurate, a closer, more thoughtful examination of Carver's fiction, and perhaps some distance from the initial critical reception, reveals just how limited such assertions are. Beyond the obvious similarities in their prose styles, their reliance on minimalist/precisionist techniques of

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<sup>8</sup> Flower continues: "But where Hemingway's purified style was meant to imply volumes of unspoken knowledge, like the seven-eighths of an iceberg underwater, Carver's method suggests that the other seven-eighths either isn't there or isn't knowable" (281). One of Carver's most astute critics, William L. Stull, says Carver follows "a trail blazed by Hemingway . . . the modernist *via negativa* of brevity, understatement, and crafted omission" ("Beyond Hopelessville" 4). To prove this he quotes the Carver essay "On Writing": "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" (*Fires* 26). Irving Howe comments on how Carver and Hemingway both capture the "American voice of loneliness and stoicism, the native soul locked in this continent's space" (42), while David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips address how Carver moves beyond Hemingway to capture elements of a post-modern sensibility, "beyond the flat quality of the Hemingway hero struggling to preserve an identity in the drear vastness of the wasteland" (81). An English critic, Allan Lloyd Smith, locates this post-modern sensibility: "Carver's people resemble Hemingway's damaged heroes, the walking wounded of stories like 'Big Two-Hearted River'; but Carver's people suffer not from the ravages of war but the atrophy of their culture: they have the brain-damage caused by TV, bowling alleys and trailer parks, the lack of money and the lack of words to cope with their experience" (50).

parataxis, the avoidance of grammatical subordination, authorial intrusion and overt intellectual content,<sup>9</sup> it appears that the differences in the approaches of Carver and Hemingway are much more significant than the similarities. Nevertheless, the Hemingway influence, such as it is, is more apparent in Carver's early stories than in his later ones, where his literary allegiances seemed to have moved on as his style continued to evolve.<sup>10</sup> In Carver's third published story, the first to be published in a literary magazine not run by students,<sup>11</sup> he tackles the structure of "Big Two-Hearted River" in such a way as to suggest the continuing degradation of the wilderness idyll that I have remarked in Hemingway's fiction. This story, "Pastoral," first appeared in the *Western Humanities Review* in 1963, was collected in *Furious Seasons* (1977), and was finally republished in slightly altered form as "The Cabin" in *Fires* (1983, 1989).

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<sup>9</sup> Hamilton E. Cochrane: "Like Hemingway, Carver writes in a spare style that tells nothing, but shows everything. . ." (79).

<sup>10</sup> Carver cites Hemingway first in a list of influences, or writers whose work he greatly admires, in "The Paris Review Interview" (Simpson and Buzbee 46). In an interview with John Alton conducted in 1986, Carver lists Hemingway as one of the writers whose stories he used as models for his own, but adds this disclaimer: "by the time I was finished with each of my stories, the original model was so far removed, so far back in the misty past, that the finished product bore no resemblance to what I had started out with" (152). Yet in the essay "Fires" Carver says, "On occasion it's been said that my writing is 'like' Hemingway's writing. But I can't say his writing influenced mine" (28). In his essay "'After the Denim' and 'After the Storm'," James Plath addresses the dynamic of Carver coming to terms with the Hemingway influence, moving from an early ambivalence to a comfortable recognition of a powerful mentor.

<sup>11</sup> Chronology from Stull, "Raymond Carver Remembered" (465-66).

"Pastoral," like the story it is modelled upon,<sup>12</sup> centres on a character's return to a place of significance, although it is not exactly the same kind of place--the main character, Harold (whether or not this is his first or last name is not entirely clear--he is called both Mr. Harold and just plain Harold),<sup>13</sup> did not grow up here, but he did use to come here with his wife quite often, "two or three times a year" (33). Now it has been three years since they were last here, and this time Mr. Harold comes by himself, facts which are very significant in themselves. Despite the fact that Mr. Harold did not grow up in the place where the story takes place, this place does evoke for him memories of places like this one, places where he did spend a lot of time as a boy.<sup>14</sup> The activities he engages in here cause him to recall who he was as a boy and the things he did then:

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<sup>12</sup> Stull calls "Pastoral" an *hommage* to Hemingway: "the protagonist, a spiritual descendant of Nick Adams, has left his wife and returned to a favorite fishing haunt--Hemingway's Big Two-Hearted River rechanneled through the Oregon woods" ("Visions and Revisions" 82).

<sup>13</sup> In "The Cabin" he is referred to as Mr. Harrold throughout, the variant spelling making clear that this is a surname. However, this still does not make for any certainty that Harold in "Pastoral" is intended to be understood as a surname. Stull suggests that the inclusion of the tag "Mr." in "The Cabin" indicates that this protagonist is more "mature" than his equivalent in "Pastoral" ("Visions and Revisions" 83). This is debatable--it could also be that Mr. Harrold is just more formal with the local people. Ewing Campbell takes the significance of the name to new extremes in his book, *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction*, where he states: "The name of the protagonist announces the milieu within which everything occurs and evokes a long list of Norse and Saxon heroes who, like King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, ended their lives in defeat" (6).

<sup>14</sup> In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory in 1984, Carver reveals his initial impulse to write as being intimately tied up with the wilderness: "I began writing by wanting to write about those things like hunting and fishing that played a real part in my emotional life" (115).

He held the heavy rod straight ahead of him when he had to push through the bushes or go under the trees with low limbs, cradled up under his arm like it was a lance. And sometimes, when he was a kid and had gone fishing for two or three days at a time, hiking in by himself, he'd carried his rod like this even when there was no brush or trees, maybe just a big green meadow and he'd imagine himself in the lists coming down on his opponent. (38)

An interesting point brought up by young Harold's experience of the wilderness has to do with his imaginative appreciation of it. The young Harold's experience of the wilderness does not connect him to a uniquely American wilderness idyll. He does not wish, as does the young Nick Adams, to be an Indian; instead Harold cloaks the American wilderness in fragments of a European literary tradition which is completely foreign to this soil. The incoherence inherent in this act of imaginative bricolage indicates the confusion and alienation of the young Harold with regard to the places where he lives. It does not matter so much whether they are here or there; it is who occupies the space that determines the meaning of the space, a position which is derived from European metaphysics rather than mythologies native to the Americas.

Everything about Mr. Harold's return to this place is a corrupted version of Nick Adam's experience in "Big Two-Hearted

River."<sup>15</sup> Travelling by car it is possible to pass through great distances without ever really talking to other human beings, beyond perhaps barking some instructions at them about refueling, and without ever really being in any of the places one has passed through. The enclosed space of the automobile separates the individual from the environment more effectively than other modes of transportation. The landscape which one passes by is not something one is in, but something merely passed through, landscape looked at from the outside rather than places entered. Mr. Harold compares the landscape that he watches through the windscreen of his car to "some of those Chinese landscapes [Frances and he had] looked at that time in Portland" (33). Again, the inappropriateness of the reference indicates how deeply Mr. Harold is alienated from the place where he is. He had liked these paintings because they were something "different," which in their novelty are completely foreign to the spirit of the wilderness idyll, which is concerned with what is familiar and known to all who inhabit a certain place. Novelty, a virtue in the world of civilized decadence, is not a virtue of the wilderness idyll.

Mr. Harold arrives at his destination with the superficial, nagging "stiffness in his back and neck" (33) to which the car traveller is subject rather than with the pains caused by a more primal or authentic mode of transport. The destination itself is not

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<sup>15</sup> Plath argues that "the youth of Nick Adams is supplanted by the old age of the main character, Mr. Harold" (40). I see no evidence that we must consider Mr. Harold to be elderly.

particularly idyllic: a semi-shabby motel complex with a "pale-red, flickering neon sign." Where Nick Adams arrives at a ghost-town which is being reclaimed by the wilderness and immediately comes into contact with the river itself, the pure heart of the wilderness idyll, Mr. Harold arrives at an outpost of a degraded progress, where almost immediately, upon stepping out of his car, he runs into "a young couple coming out" the door. The way the young man "held her arm as they went down the stairs" reminds Mr. Harold of all the other times he arrived here with his wife--running into this couple is like running into a doppelganger. The changes that have occurred inside the motel are much more subtle than the devastation of the town in "Big Two-Hearted River," and Mr. Harold strikes the reader as a very observant fellow because of the way he picks up on these changes--perhaps he is, like Nick Adams, a writer:

Down the wall on his right, the counter and the little tables, they were there before, but not the postcard rack and the colored gum ball machine beside the door. He reached out and laid his hand over the glass top, blotting out the Lion's Club sticker. On his left was a glass case with leather purses and high-heeled shoes inside, leather wallets and pairs of moccasins.

Scattered around on top, Indian bead necklaces and bracelets, pieces of petrified wood. He remembered a

fireplace from before but they must have covered it up or something. (34)<sup>16</sup>

The things that Mr. Harold observes here place him in the heart of a homogenous, middle-American culture. Everything is familiar, but in a way that calls into mind the general rather than the particular. Service club stickers and postcards could be anywhere. It is not, as Arthur M. Saltzman says, "a tacky approximation of the frontier, complete with Indian souvenirs" (93). This place is not on the margins of American culture at all, but reflects the values of the centre which is everywhere. The crafts of the indigenous peoples of the region, on display in the context they are provided with here, show just how irrelevant the values of the native peoples of the North American continent have become to those who have taken it from them. The fact that the fireplace has been covered up reflects a desire for modernization, to be with the times, which turns its back on the concept of a heritage, not to mention the practicality of having provisions for alternative heating in case the supply of oil, gas or electricity is interrupted.

The most significant change which has taken place is that the owners, the Mayes, have relinquished day-to-day control of the operation to their daughter and her husband. One gets a sense from Mr. Harold's experience of the various changes in the diner and from the less than friendly welcome he receives from the

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<sup>16</sup> The fireplace is still there in "The Cabin," but much of the meticulous precision of Mr. Harold's description here is lost through the neglect of spatial cues as well as particular objects (*Fires* 146). One would presume that Carver does this in order to establish this place as even more of a generic one than it already is in "Pastoral."

waitress there, the Mayes' granddaughter, that the new management just does not care about the place as had their elders. The younger generation, who did not have to build the place, or to build it up, or to suffer in any way to achieve control of it, who merely inherited what others had built for them, take the place for granted as their birthright and due. In contrast to the attitude of the waitress, when Mrs. Mayes appears from the kitchen to greet her guest, the warmth of her welcome strikes the reader as sincere, or at least reflecting a sincere concern with him as a customer, a category of person very important to the operator of a small business. When she asks Mr. Harold, "Where's the missus?", he makes up an excuse for her ("Didn't feel too well this week" (35)) rather than risking hurting Mrs. Mayes' feelings by telling her the truth--that his wife just had not felt like coming. Mr. Harold knows that Mrs. Mayes takes a lot of pride in her place, and that she would like to think of it as a place where nice people like Mr. Harold and his wife would want to return to.

Mrs. Mayes escorts Mr. Harold to his cabin, "past a little shed with a TIRES sign hung over the door." When she notices him looking in through the broken windows, she quickly explains: "Kids have done that. . . . They don't miss a chance to do us dirt. A whole pack of them all the time running wild from down at that construction camp." Despite the damage that these kids do to her place, Mrs. Mayes is still sympathetic to their plight. She refers to them as "Poor little devils" and pities them the "Sorry home life" they must have, "always on the move like that." She has witnessed



her America changing from a land where people lived in one place all of their lives, and consequently felt a loyalty and a sense of belonging, as well as a responsibility to those they shared it with, to a land where people are always on the move in search of the means of economic survival. These economic migrants fail to establish a sense of belonging anywhere in particular, a sense of the familiar, and of the qualities that distinguish one place from another. The economic forces that guide the movements of these peoples enforce a certain spiritual restlessness on them as well, which turns their children into aimless pack animals.<sup>17</sup> This place, which is still special to Mrs. Mayes and Mr. Harold, despite the efforts of the former to make it representative of what she understands to be the mainstream of American modernity, is suffering from the homogenization of American culture stemming from economic forces far beyond the control of individuals.

Mr. Harold's setting up of his "camp" can be understood as an ironic take on Nick Adams' preparations in "Big Two-Hearted River." Whereas Nick meticulously set up his tent and built his fire, Mr. Harold "drove the car up as far as he could and started to unload" (36). Although the process of setting up camp strikes one as trivial and easy in comparison to Nick's labors, still Mr. Harold

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<sup>17</sup> The boys who have done this vandalism are only the most dramatic example of a larger phenomenon, that of the empty self. Philip Cushman, in an essay entitled "Why the Self is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology," claims that post-World War Two America "has shaped a self that experiences a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning. It experiences these social absences and their consequences 'interiorly' as a lack of personal conviction and worth, and it embodies the absences as a chronic, undifferentiated emotional hunger" (600).

feels some positive sense of accomplishment: "Sitting there at the table smoking a cigaret with his tackle box open and everything in place, his flies and weights spread out, testing leader strength between his hands and tying up outfits for that afternoon, he was glad he'd come." He practises the same kind of deferral of pleasure that Nick does in "Big Two-Hearted River," deciding to save the bottle of Scotch he has brought "for when he came back tonight and the rest for tomorrow." He decides to have a little nap before he heads out to tackle the stream, but when he opens his eyes again,

The room was dark. . . . He lay there trying to focus his eyes on the window, not able to believe it was really dark outside. He shut his eyes again and turned over, stretching his legs slowly. He'd only wanted to sleep maybe an hour. He opened his eyes and sat up heavily on the side of the bed.

Whereas Nick wakes up from his nap in the wilderness feeling refreshed, at least partly because he truly needed the rest after the exertions of the morning, Mr. Harold wakes up angry that he has wasted the afternoon sleeping, and with a "thick, dull feeling" in his head. Perhaps Mr. Harold did not deserve a rest, since his exertions were not true to the spirit of the place, or because he did not really need to rest from exertions which were not real. Mr. Harold is not on wilderness time, he is obsessed with getting things done, he has a schedule and is angry when things don't go according to plan. He expresses this anger in an epithet ("God

dammit!") which contrasts with the joyful nature of the various epithets which Nick utters in "Big Two-Hearted River." Mr. Harold is out of synch with wilderness time when he plans to go fishing despite the fact that it is so cold.<sup>18</sup> Fish, as cold-blooded creatures, tend not to be very active when it is cold out, and even less hungry. Winter fishing is lousy, but Mr. Harold wants nature to conform to his will--he has a couple of days off and wants to go fishing, and if it is the middle of winter it is all the same to him. He will do what he wants regardless of the appropriateness of this behavior to the natural order of things.

While Nick Adams is self-sufficient in the wilderness, bringing his food and supplies with him and cooking for himself, Mr. Harold must rely on others to provide for him. After he wakes up so angrily he goes to the diner, only to find it is empty, and has to convince the girl, Edith, to serve him, which she does grudgingly, resenting the interruption to her routine which is all he represents to her. She does not even try to hide her resentment; apparently she couldn't care less:

After she brought the plate over she hung around in front, filling sugar bowls and napkin holders, looking up at him sometimes. The bitch. She came over then with a wet rag and began wiping the crumbs off the table in front of him. He sat with his hands folded across his stomach, looking down at the rag sliding

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<sup>18</sup> The story does not make clear whether it is deep autumn or early winter in any of the versions. All we know is that it is deer season ("Pastoral" 36).

back and forth across the table leaving little streaks.

(37)

It seems as if Mr. Harold has brought this anger with him--an anger which Nick Adams would probably think inappropriate to the situation. Mr. Harold wallows in his anger, allowing himself to come to hate this girl rather than trying understanding what exactly is happening here. Surely he, a man who "liked things in order," could recognize that his presence in the diner was an affront to her order? Mr. Harold is not sufficiently within himself to make such an empathic leap of understanding--he is still trapped in his angry urban self. He goes to sleep that night hoping that tomorrow will be better.

Harold wakes up early in the morning, "so early it was still almost dark in the cabin." He drinks "almost a quart of chocolate milk" (38) for breakfast and makes his lunch, three peanut butter sandwiches and some cookies. This is hardly the hearty wilderness fare of Nick Adams, but the diet of a machine powered by convenience foods.<sup>19</sup> After breakfast Harold sets off "down the packed, slippery trail toward the river." He is pleased to think he is the only one up at this hour, but this feeling doesn't last for long--soon he hears shots and realizes that the hunters are already out. The snow is deep and Harold thinks that the deer "don't have much of a chance" in these conditions. Lost in meditation about his boyhood fishing expeditions, he steps into a

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<sup>19</sup> In "The Cabin" Mr. Harold skips the chocolate milk, and the cookies are specified as oatmeal. He is obviously not to be understood as being as much of an aficionado of sugar products as Harold (*Fires* 150).

deep snow drift and panics, "clawing up handfuls of snow and vines to get out." The wilderness is no place for the kind of dreaminess which is the psychic escape of imaginative people in the city--one needs to be right where one is rather than off in some parallel fantasy universe; the wilderness has as many hazards as the city and no crowds to keep you from doing something stupid.<sup>20</sup> Recovering from the momentary disorientation of his panic, Harold starts to feel good as he approaches the river itself--he has got to where he wants to be: "The big trees all around him and the high cloud-cowled white mountains. Pretty as a picture the way the steam lay over the river. It made him feel like he didn't even want to smoke, and he sat there on the log swinging his legs back and forth while he threaded the line through his guides" (39). The vision of the wilderness idyll, even filtered through the ossified language of cliché, fills him with the sense of boyish enthusiasm he is seeking. He fishes the hole "longer than he ever would have before without a strike," he is happy just to be there, to feel "some of the old excitement coming back."

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<sup>20</sup> An example of what I mean: You are standing at the curb waiting for a light to change, but you are not really there; instead you are off dreamily engaged in some fantasy where you get the better of those who habitually oppress you in your everyday life. Without being conscious of what you are doing, you step off the curb into the path of oncoming traffic before the light has changed. A hand comes out of the crowd behind you and yanks you back to safety before you are flattened by the bus coming towards you. You shake off the dreamy feeling and look around to thank your saviour, but now you are standing alone on the corner. It is as if you were saved by a crowd. But, of course, there is another side to the city--given the same situation the crowd might choose to push you out into traffic instead.

But Harold's momentary good spirits are ruined when he sees a deer stumble "out of the brush upriver and onto the little beach, nodding and twisting its head, streaming long ropes of white mucous." The sight of the deer dragging its broken left hind leg behind it fills his stomach with "a kind of bad taste." He tries to continue fishing after the deer has disappeared back into the brush, but his heart is not in it now. He forces a sandwich he is not hungry for down his throat. Everything has been ruined by the image of the agonized deer and the thought of the "Dirty bastards" who did that to her. At this point it is necessary to pause for a moment to consider the female presence in "Pastoral," a sharp contrast to the almost completely masculine landscape of Nick Adams' "Big Two-Hearted River." The deer-victim is female, and in trying to steer his consciousness away from the horror of its wounds Harold thinks of Frances, the wife whose absence haunts the story, and constitutes a powerful presence in its absence. Harold does not want to think of her "either," but he cannot help himself. He remembers "that morning when he caught the three steelhead and it was all he could do to carry them up the hill in the gunny sack." Her absence makes everything seem not quite as good as it would be with her there. Harold is not a stoic, autonomous man like Nick Adams--he is thoroughly domesticated and dependent upon women. He does not seek to escape the world of women, as Fiedler suggests the characters in Hemingway's wilderness do, and given the circumstances of the story it seems that there is no escape from this world anyhow.

Now that the idyll has been ruined by the sight of the wounded doe, everything around Harold takes on a negative light. He hates "the black, awkward flight" (40) of the crows overhead. He returns to himself from his brief sojourn in the zone, again prey to the tricks of a divided consciousness. When he casts again he wonders how the fly looks to the fish down there, "if it were light enough for a fish to see." Harold now occupies a space where he regrets virtually all the choices he has made which have brought him to where he is--when the boys who shot the deer come "out of the trees and onto the beach upriver," and then "down the beach toward him[, he looks] up at the hills and then down the river where the best water was and where he should have gone." He feels isolated, exposed, precariously situated, caught in mid-stream as it were. When the boys yell at him he wishes "it could have been when he was on the shore, not here with the water pushing against his legs, off balance on the slippery rocks." All the menace of the story so far finds its focus in the figure of the "Gaunt and thin-faced boy Jules,"<sup>21</sup> who holds his gun "in his right hand like a pistol, pointing the barrel up the beach." When Jules asks Harold if he has seen a deer come out of the bush, Harold cannot contain all the bad feelings which have been welling up inside him: "It wasn't a him, it was a her. . . . And her back leg was almost shot off, for Christ's sake."<sup>22</sup> The boys are

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<sup>21</sup> Renamed Earl in "The Cabin" (*Fires* 154).

<sup>22</sup> Another story which concerns a conflict resulting from sloppy hunting practice is "The Calm," from *What We Talk about When We Talk About Love*. See Mark Facknitz's article "Raymond Carver and the Rediscovery of Human Worth" for a valuable discussion of this story.

impervious to Harold's anger; they do not care for his morality. Even after Jules half-points the gun at him, Harold continues to push the confrontation towards violence rather than trying to defuse the situation, calling the boys "little bastards" (41) to their faces and suggesting that he knows more about them than he really does. The boy Jules raises the rifle to his shoulder and pulls back the hammer with his thumb:

The barrel pointed somewhere at his stomach, or lower down maybe, his groin or his balls. He felt them contract and shrink up into his stomach. The water swirled and foamed around his boots and made a little trail of white before smoothing out. He swayed, working his mouth at the phlegm pulling in his dry throat but not able to move his tongue, looking down into the clear water at the rocks and the little spaces of sand. He wondered what it would be if his boots tipped water and he went down, rolling like a chunk.<sup>23</sup>

Everything that happens now occurs in a kind of dream-space. Harold feels "the ice water come up through his legs . . . into his chest." He asks the boys: "What's the matter with you?", in an attempt to appeal to something they share, some common idea, but "All of them just stood there looking at him." Finally, their

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<sup>23</sup> In "The Cabin": "The barrel was pointed at Mr. Harrold's stomach, or else a little lower down" (154). The creepy shrinking up of the testicles disappears, and along with it the allusion to the fear of castration as a recurring trope in Hemingway's fiction. The phlegm which connects Harold in "Pastoral" with the figure of the doe ("streaming long ropes of white mucous" (39)) is also absent in the revised scene in "The Cabin."



ominous silence completely breaks down Harold's anger, leaving him defenceless. Even after Harold says "Don't shoot," the boy Jules holds "the gun on him for another minute" before lowering it, and then taunts him: "Scared, wasn't you?" The boys start to throw rocks at Harold, but he is not even really there any longer. He stands there, lost in the space between consciousness and something else, "hearing the rocks splash around him."

The boys eventually tire of this game, and move as "a pack back into the trees" after one of them makes "an obscene gesture with his hand." Harold waits until they are gone before starting to make his way back to the cabin. On his way back he realizes that he has left his rod back there somewhere, and despite the fact that "It was a good rod, one that he'd paid over forty dollars for one summer five or six years ago" (42),<sup>24</sup> he decides not to go back for it. Harold has been infected with the nihilism of the situation he has just endured, and neither the rod itself nor the money it cost him matter now. He is confused and suffers from a profound sense of displacement, a feeling that he has failed somehow: "Somehow he had missed it and it was gone. Something heroic." But what is the nature of his failure? What is this thing, this "something heroic" which is now gone? An opportunity to die for an ideal with no witnesses to his lofty virtue? These boys force Harold to look into himself, and now, having done this, all the

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<sup>24</sup> In "The Cabin" the rod is worth over ninety dollars (155), the change reflecting what inflation had done to the buying power of a dollar in the twenty years between the two versions of the story.

things around him appear "wordless, distorted" (42).<sup>25</sup> The fact that Harold was not able to communicate to these boys, these half-wild pack creatures of the new American wilderness, the sense of guilt that he thinks they should feel for wounding the doe, calls into question the validity of his habitual ideas about right and wrong. He has to face the possibility that his morality, the ideas of chivalry which he internalized as a child, are not universal, that they might be, in fact, a luxury that the children of migrant industrial workers who inhabit the fringes of the American wilderness cannot afford.

In such an interpretation, we can see "Pastoral" as representing a kind of ironic homage to Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," and can understand that much of the irony is inherent in the kind of degradation that the wilderness idyll has undergone in the time that separates the two stories. In the postmodern world of Raymond Carver the wilderness has finally been hunted down--there is no more West for it to escape into. The values of civilization have overtaken and infected the wilderness, which is now roamed by men who lack any real sense of connection to it, and who murder and destroy indiscriminately. There are still a few remnants of the old order around, people like Mrs. Maye, who actually care enough to do a thing right, but for

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<sup>25</sup> The ending of "The Cabin" contains neither these words nor the last ones quoted. It goes on considerably longer than the ending of "Pastoral," working against the grain of most of the revisions, which tend to serve to make the final version of the story shorter and more austere in most instances.

the most part these few are lost among the majority who just do not care, and do not see why they should.

In the version of the ending from "The Cabin," Mr. Harrold returns to his cabin to discover that someone, "Mrs. Maye, he supposed, had built a little fire in the stove" (138). In the quiet warmth of the cabin he is able to reclaim some sense of his humanity, to bring himself to do what he could not bring himself to do at the end of the earlier version, "to think of home, of getting back there before dark." He thinks "of the river and of the large fish that must be even now moving upriver in that heart-stopping cold water." The fish are where they belong, and he is not needed there to complete the scene. He belongs at home with his wife, and he is lucky to at least have somewhere where he might belong. The boys, like their fathers who are working at the dam, belong nowhere, and it is this lack of connection to any place in particular that makes them capable of both anything and nothing. Where Nick Adams is able to return to a wilderness which offers at least some hope for redemption despite the degradation it has suffered since he was a boy there, Mr. Harrold is unable to find what he is looking for in the wilderness. He has to return home from the wilderness to his domestic life for whatever redemption is available to him there. Arthur M. Saltzman, author of the first book on Carver, claims that for Mr. Harrold "going home does not represent his positive determination to rebuild a relationship; it signals only one more retreat" (99n). I do not think things are as clear cut as that. Surely Carver's aim in revising the ending was to

modify the air of utter defeat in the first one, where Harold appears completely lost, thinking to himself that "He couldn't very well go home" ("Pastoral" 42). But in taking Mr. Harrold inside, where "the warmth [can] gradually come back into his body" ("The Cabin" 156), Carver would seem to be indicating that there is some hope for a man like Mr. Harrold, but that this hope lies indoors, attended to by women like Mrs. Maye. Mr. Harrold does not make a final speech in which he reveals to the reader the reasons for his coming here without his wife, so we cannot assume that their relationship needs rebuilding. There are indications that all is not perfect between the two of them, but the way the story is made leads us to believe that a neutral reading of the ending is more appropriate than the purely negative one Saltzman assigns to it, and comparing the two endings, one cannot help but read the second as almost hopeful.

#### **D. Treatment of the Wilderness Idyll in Other Stories by Raymond Carver**

The confusion and conflict between the values of domesticity and of the wilderness which we see in "Pastoral" and "The Cabin" are central to a number of Carver stories. The values of domesticity and of the wilderness are fundamentally opposed to each other, although they share some common ground. The former partakes of everyday time and the familiar spaces of the

home; it is the reigning "space" of traditional bourgeois realist fiction of social life. The latter partakes of a heightened sense of time and space that is simultaneously familiar and strange, familiar in that for those raised in proximity to great tracts of wilderness this is what they know, but strange because no matter how well the wilderness is known it must always remain radically other. Whereas in the true wilderness idyll men and women exist together in a prelapsarian state, the values of domesticity are predicated upon a fall into experience and separation according to culturally determined ideas about behaviors and roles appropriate to each sex. The story "Distance" illustrates the tension between the domestic and wilderness idylls. "Distance" first appeared in book form in *Furious Seasons* (1977), was cut to the bone and retitled "Everything Stuck to Him" for inclusion in Carver's second major-press release, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), then restored to its original title and form for *Fires* (1983), and finally collected in Carver's self-created canon, *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). "Distance" is a framed story in which the narrator relates to his adult daughter, "a survivor from top to bottom" (*Fires* 131), a story from her childhood. In the story the narrator and his now-absent wife are a young couple trying to establish a life for themselves and their baby. But at the same time the narrator is trying to keep open a connection to his own past by spending time with Carl Sutherland, "a friend of the boy's father, who was dead now. After the father's death, "Maybe trying to replace a loss they both felt, the boy and Sutherland had

started hunting together" (132). It is through the figure of Carl Sutherland that the boy tries to keep alive his connection to his father, who is intimately tied in with the wilderness idyll. Carl makes the boy feel uncomfortable with the authority implicit in the strength of his silence, and yet "the man had a toughness and woods-savvy about him that the boy liked and admired" (133).

Initially the wife has no objections to the boy's proposed hunting trip with Carl, but on the night before, the baby will not stop crying. They take turns staying up with the baby, but it never stops for long before it starts to cry again. When the boy is awakened by the baby's cries at quarter to four in the morning, only forty-five minutes before he has to get up, he swears in exasperation, and this upsets the girl. The boy tries to convince himself and the girl that there is nothing really wrong with the baby, that it is just "something on her stomach" (135), so that he can still go hunting with Carl, but the girl has other ideas. She does not "intend to be left alone with a sick baby" (136). She does not "Give a damn about what [he] and Carl have planned." She figures his hunting expedition is a form of desertion, and forces the boy to choose between his family and Carl. The boy leaves the house and drives to Carl's place, where he decides to do what he thinks must be the right thing. He explains the situation to Carl, and Carl understands: "You should have just stepped to the phone and called me, boy. . . . It's okay. You know you didn't have to come over here to tell me. What the hell, this hunting business you can take it or leave it. It's not important" (137).

While at one time this hunting business might have been very important, even necessary for survival, now it has become merely a way for men to keep in touch with something they learned from their fathers. Absolved of his guilty feelings about ruining the hunting trip by Carl's wise words, the boy returns home to be forgiven by his wife. In the meantime the baby has settled down, so together they prepare a large breakfast to celebrate his choice of domestic responsibility over an illusory wilderness freedom. The only problem is that as soon as the boy starts "to cut into the waffle, he [turns] the plate over into his lap" (138). Carver does not allow this scene of domestic sacrament to come off without irony. The mood shifts and the young couple laugh over this minor incident rather than crying or using it as an excuse to resume bickering, but the reader is unsure exactly what to make of this scene. The narrator recalls how "They had leaned on each other and laughed until the tears had come, while everything else--the cold and where he'd go in it--was outside for a while anyway" (139).

"That life" is behind him now, and he lives in Milan, far away from Carl Sutherland and what he represents. The permanence of the domestic life he had shared with his wife turned out to be only an illusion. We are unsure exactly what happened to her, but it is clear that she is not with him now. He is like one of the Canada geese which he was so interested in as a boy, who, having chosen "a mate early in life" (133), is doomed to "live off by itself somewhere" if that mate is killed. The rationale

with which he then defended his violent imposition of such a state on a mated pair of geese, that "there are all kinds of contradictions in life" (134) which cannot be resolved no matter how much thought is devoted to them, has come back to haunt him now. Looking back in an effort to try and make some meaning out of these events for his daughter, all he can say is that "Things change . . . without your realizing it or wanting them to" (139). The contradictions inherent in the wilderness idyll cannot be resolved in the domestic sphere. The narrator's confusion of contexts, his attempt to use a metaphor from the wilderness idyll to explain to himself events which occurred in his domestic life, makes any real understanding about what happened difficult, if not impossible. The natural cannot in this case serve as an analogy for what is psychological and cultural. The narrator has lost his connection to one of the places which defined his being for himself, or at least that part of him which was connected to Carl Sutherland and his father.

In the story "So Much Water So Close to Home"<sup>26</sup> the wilderness idyll functions as a period of respite for a group of men who "fish together every spring and early summer, the first two or three months of the season, before family vacations, little league baseball, and visiting relatives can intrude" (*Fires* 186). The wilderness idyll in which these men participate bears little relation to any of the permutations we have observed thus far.

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<sup>26</sup> Like "Distance," included in *Furious Seasons* (1977), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), *Fires* (1983, 1989) and *Where I'm Calling From* (1988).



For these men the wilderness is merely an escape from the stifling confines of their domestic lives, and from the women who dominate them. They are like the social fishermen of whom Nick Adams is so contemptuous in "Big Two-Hearted River," the ones who drive down from the city for the weekend, crowding the real fishermen off the stream. Fishing seems to be little more than a pretext for these men--they are here as much to drink whisky, play cards, tell coarse stories and speak "of vulgar or dishonest escapades out of their past" (187) as to fish. On the first evening of this fishing trip, the men discover, "even before they could set up camp . . . [a] girl floating face down in the river, nude, lodged near the shore in some branches" (186-87). Common sense and decency, not to mention the law, would seem to indicate an appropriate response to such a discovery, namely, that it should be reported to the authorities immediately, even if it means ruining the fishing trip. And, in fact, when the men talk it over, "one of them thought they should start back to the car at once" (187). But the "others stirred the sand with their shoes and said they felt inclined to stay. They pleaded fatigue, the late hour, the fact that the girl 'wasn't going anywhere.' In the end they all decided to stay." The fatigue and callous pragmatism at the heart of the men's justification of their reluctance to do what they know is right reveals their moral superficiality. Their attitudes are inharmonious with the idyllic wilderness, mere reenactments of their urban lives stripped of the immediate threat of external negative sanction:

They drank a lot of whisky and when the moon came up they talked about the girl. Someone thought they should do something to prevent the body from floating away. Somehow they thought that this might create a problem for them if it floated away during the night. They took flashlights and stumbled down to the river . . . . One of the men . . . waded into the water and took the girl by the fingers, and pulled her, still face down, closer to shore, into shallow water, and then took a piece of nylon cord and tied it around her wrist and then secured the cord to tree roots, all the while the flashlights of the other men played over the girl's body. Afterwards, they went back to camp and drank more whisky. Then they went to sleep.

The act of securing the evidence, which is all the girl's body represents for them, shows the men paying lip service to the values of their society, and each of them would no doubt argue until he was blue in the face that he truly stood behind these values. But the tone in which their acts are described, the spin put on events by the narrator, Claire, wife to one of the fishermen, would seem to indicate that these values mean nothing to these men; that given the opportunity, the freedom to act in circumstances where agents of societal authority are not looking over their shoulders, social values are easily overcome by the warped boyishness, the anti-social tendencies of these men. In this light they appear to be the grown-up versions of the wild

pack of boys in "Pastoral." They have settled down some, but their experience of the wilderness shows that they were never properly indoctrinated into its mysteries, that they lack the sense of connectedness and responsibility which is a proper attribute of the wilderness idyll. The failure of the men to uphold any kind of coherent moral code by doing only what best serves their own short-term interests, costs them dearly in the end. All hell breaks loose when the story breaks in the local media, and the men are subject to telephone harassment and public denunciation. The real work of the story centers on the effect all of this has on Claire, as she has to reassess her relationship with her husband and her life in general in light of these events.

"Pastoral" and "The Cabin" are, surprisingly enough, the only Carver stories where the idyllic wilderness is truly central. However, in many other Carver stories, such as "Distance" and "So Much Water So Close to Home," the wilderness idyll plays an important if not central role. Most of these stories appeared in the early collections: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), *Furious Seasons* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

"Nobody Said Anything" is one of these stories, first collected in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and later appearing in *Where I'm Calling From*. James Plath compares the narrator of "Nobody Said Anything" to a "young Nick Adams" ("Raymond Carver and the Popular Mechanics of Divorce" 3), but this comparison is a gross mis-representation of the spirit of the story, the atmosphere of which is far more banal and hopeless than anything Nick

Adams could have imagined. The story concerns the breakdown of the American family. The first-person narrator, who can be identified only as "R" from the signature on the note he leaves for his mother when he goes fishing (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 45), is a boy in early adolescence. He has a brother, George, with whom he is always fighting, and parents who do likewise. "But unlike his brother, whose callousness and profanity armor him against the sounds of the fighting of the parents . . . the narrator takes every harsh word he overhears as if it were a blow struck at him" (Saltzman 34). It is a family caught in the process of disintegration which Carver shows us--there are loud arguments, crying, and the mother has told the narrator that his father "wanted to tear up the family" (*Will You Please* 41). The narrator is a weirdly sensitive little opportunist who uses his mother's emotional exhaustion against her. When he decides he wants to stay home from school for the day, she does not have the energy to oppose him, although she does deny George, who had been "waiting to see how it turned out so he could make his move." It is a purely pragmatic decision that she makes. When George claims that he is sick too, she replies, "You're not going to stay here and fight with your brother all day. Now get up and get dressed. I mean it. I don't feel like another battle this morning" (42). The one condition that his mother puts on the narrator's staying home is that he not watch television, but the first thing he does once his mother makes him a bed on the couch in the living room is to turn "the picture on without the volume." He steals some cigarettes

from "her pack of weeds" while she is in the bathroom and starts to read one of his Edgar Rice Burroughs novels. Mom sees the television but decides not to make an issue of it: "Last night she'd said she wouldn't know what it meant any more to go to work without being 'stirred up'" (43).

The narrator is a master manipulator--he knows just how far he can count on his mother's will bending to his, and pulls back before she breaks. It is evident that she feels bad about leaving him alone in the house all day--she emphasizes that he is not to "turn the burners on." But she does not have the kind of job where she can take a sick day off with pay--from the narrator's description of her outfit ("the white blouse, the wide black belt, and the black skirt") and her schedule ("She worked Wednesdays through Sundays") it seems likely that she is a waitress. As soon as he hears her pull "away from the curb" he "turns the sound on loud," lights one of the cigarettes, and masturbates while watching "a show about doctors and nurses."

As a boy in adolescence, the narrator's consciousness is largely dominated by hormonal activity. He thinks incessantly about sex, and the utter banality of the sexual impulse is evident throughout the story, forming a second context which plays against the first, the breakdown of the family. The narrator is at an age where his desires far outstrip his practical understanding of what exactly constitutes sex. After growing bored with

television<sup>27</sup> he ransacks his parents' room, looking for insight into the world of grownup sexual behavior. He knows the jar of Vaseline he once found "at the back of a drawer . . . must have something to do with it" (44), but he does not know exactly what. It is all very confusing:

I studied the label and hoped it would reveal something, a description of what people did, or else about how you applied the Vaseline, that sort of thing. But it didn't. *Pure Petroleum Jelly*, that was all it said on the front label. But just reading that was enough to give you a boner. *An Excellent Aid in the Nursery*, it said on the back. I tried to make the connection between *Nursery*--the swings and slides, the sandboxes, monkeybars--and what went on in the bed between them. (44)

He is surrounded by signifiers which tantalize him with their lack of context, which float free of signification. After exhausting his parents' bedroom for clues about the kinds of things which connect men and women, the narrator decides to "walk to Birch Creek" to go fishing. He packs a lunch reminiscent of Mr. Harold's in "Pastoral"--"a couple of tuna sandwiches and some double-decker peanut-butter crackers," and outfits himself in imitation of his vision of the true outdoorsman, hanging a hunting knife and canteen from his belt.

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<sup>27</sup> The story is set in the pre- or early cable era in the American mediascape. Presumably it would take him slightly longer to become bored with fifty channels.

His outfit is somewhat out of synch with his surroundings; he is far from the wilderness. However, he is still an expert navigator, providing the reader with precise directions for the "forty-minute walk" (45) from his house to Birch Creek:

. . . you go to the end of our street where you hit Sixteenth Avenue. You turn left on Sixteenth and go up the hill past the cemetery and down to Lennox, where there is a Chinese restaurant. From the crossroads there, you can see the airport, and Birch Creek is below the airport. Sixteenth changes to View Road at the crossroads. You follow View for a little way until you come to the bridge. There are orchards on both sides of the road.

This is his environment, and these are its "natural" landmarks. The narrator is a kind of ironic re-working of the Nick Adams type, the competent boy-adventurer, set down in an environment where in some ways a boy is forced to grow up faster than in the woods of northern Michigan at the turn of the century, or at least to confront more of the sordid and seamy aspects of human existence at an earlier age than in the idyllic wilderness, but where in other ways it seems possible for a boy to hang onto aspects of childishness longer than he would be able to in a rural setting. He is only "halfway down Sixteenth when a woman in a red car" pulls over and offers him a ride. Under the influence of the signification of the red car, she immediately becomes for him the object of his sexual desire, as his description of her shows:

"She was thin and had little pimples around her mouth. Her hair was up in curlers. But she was sharp enough. She had a brown sweater with nice boobs inside." The little pimples and curlers make this encounter seem very real; they are the kinds of details which do not show up in the airbrushed accounts of casual sex which turn up in skin magazines. But then the narrator's imagination starts to work on the material at hand, transforming the possibilities inherent in the situation into teenage fantasy: "You always see yourself getting picked up by this woman. You know you'll fall for each other and that she'll take you home with her and let you screw her all over the house" (46). The switch from the first to the second person here gives the scene a very literary, almost filmic (as in voiceover narration) quality, but this is destroyed when the narrator begins "to get a boner thinking about it." He tries to hide his arousal with his cap, "and ultimately chides himself for his failure to be more aggressive" (Saltzman 35). He has neither the experience nor the confidence in himself to act on his desires, so instead he waits until she lets him off "a few feet from the bridge . . . hurries down the embankment, [unzips], and [shoots] off five feet over the creek" (47).

Having achieved his second ejaculation of the day, the narrator is now "ready to fish." This place holds positive memories for him; here he is able to recall good times spent with his father and brother: "I had fished here for three years, ever since we had moved. Dad used to bring George and me in the car and wait for us, smoking, baiting our hooks, tying up new rigs for us if we



snagged." We can observe here a degradation in the temporal component of the wilderness idyll, such as it exists here; three years is about all the continuity that the children of economic nomads are afforded in this world, not much compared to the kind of continuity we observe in the world of Nick Adams, which in itself pales beside the historical continuity of native Americans. Another degradation concerns the relatively passive role which the father takes in the education of his sons--while Dr. Adams teaches his son to hunt and shoot by example, going out into the woods and streams with him,<sup>28</sup> the narrator's father here does no more than the bare minimum in the way of offering guidance to his sons, helping the boys only with the aspects of fishing which they cannot as yet do for themselves, preferring to sit in the car, smoking and mulling over his own problems rather than taking a more active role in their education. The final degradation of the wilderness idyll here concerns the condition of the river itself. It is late fall, so the water level is low, and the stream seems stagnant and decrepit. In places the water is "still and the bottom

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28 ". . . Nick was very grateful to [his father] for two things: fishing and shooting. His father was as sound on those two things as he was unsound on sex, for instance, and Nick was glad that it had been that way; for someone has to give you your first gun or the opportunity to get it or use it, and you have to live where there is game or fish if you are to learn about them . . ." ("Fathers and Sons" 370). Nick does not think he needs his father's wisdom concerning sex because he acquires this knowledge amongst his Indian friends, who lack the repressively moral world view of the white community. But the narrator of "Nobody Said Anything" desperately needs his father to clarify the issues surrounding his sexuality for him. However, the father is too involved with his own problems, or his selfish interest in what are the problems of his domestic life, which are the problems of the family, to address this need, and thus the narrator is left to puzzle things out for himself, using all the contradictory information which is available to him, supplemented by his own imagination.

full of yellow leaves" (47). Water flows into the creek "out of a big pipe" (48). A fence with a "KEEP OUT sign" separates the creek bank from the airport runway, where "flowers [grow] in the cracks in the pavement. You could see where the tires had smacked down on the pavement and left oily skid marks all around the flowers." Clearly this place is a corruption of the wilderness idyll, marked with evidence of the incursion of human commercial and industrial activity onto the natural landscape. The source of this creek is a very long way from the icy clear springs around Horton's Bay.

Given the emotional conditions of the narrator's life, from which he seeks refuge but which always remain lurking in the back of his mind, and the decrepitude of the place he escapes to, it is no wonder that he feels "lousy" that he has "come this far up for nothing" (49). He continues to cast his line into the stagnant waters, but without much enthusiasm, and soon slips back into reflection about the woman who gave him the ride:

We were going to her house because she wanted help carrying in the groceries. Her husband was overseas. I touched her and she started shaking. We were French-kissing on the couch when she excused herself to go to the bathroom. I followed her. I watched as she pulled down her pants and sat on the toilet. I had a big boner and she waved me over with her hand. Just as I was going to unzip, I heard a plop in the creek. I looked and saw the tip of my fly rod jiggling.

Here all the elements of the narrator's consciousness come together in confusion--his obsessive fantasies of power and sexuality, forced into an arbitrary plot-line (reminiscent of pornographic film) which is the best his imagination can do, take on attributes of perversion. The ellision by which the plop of the woman's turd becomes the sound of a fish taking the hook, and his erect penis becomes the jiggling fly rod, is equally comic and disturbing.<sup>29</sup> It would be difficult to imagine Nick Adams mixing things up like this--for him the river is a symbol of purity, an entity which by its very proximity calms an over-heated consciousness, allowing for things to be separated and clarified rather than mixed up and confused.

Even the fish itself is a let-down for the narrator: "He wasn't very big and he didn't fight much. But I played him as long as I could. He turned on his side and lay in the current below. I didn't

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<sup>29</sup> Elements of this scene, and issues from the story as a whole, reappear in a poem from Carver's last collection, *A New Path to the Waterfall* (1989). In "The Kitchen" the first person narrator relates how his compulsive masturbation caused his fishing rod to disappear. Falling asleep after beating off on the "sandy bank" of a creek near Yakima, he awakes to the "plop" of a fish taking the hook and pulling his rod into the water. The boy grows frantic, running up and down the bank bellowing and "swearing to God / I would not touch myself again if He'd let me / retrieve that pole, that fish" (37). God only seems to exist in this boy's universe as a powerful being who does not approve of masturbation. Similarly, in "Nobody Said Anything" the narrator relates how at one point: "I thought I had better stop doing it so much. About a month back, a Saturday when they were all gone, I had picked up the Bible right after and promised and swore I wouldn't do it again. But I got jism on the Bible, and the promising and swearing lasted only a day or two, until I was by myself again" (50). "The Kitchen" seems to offer some potentially autobiographical insight into the central obsessions of "Nobody Said Anything." When the boy returns home without his rod in "The Kitchen" he finds his father "drunk / and in the kitchen with a woman not his wife, nor / my mother either" (38). The violence of the father's passions for drinking and adultery are tearing this family asunder, and fill the speaker with an unbearable anguish.

know what he was. He looked strange." It is as if the fish suffers from the same degradation of spirit as the environment. There is a sense here that boy and fish are acting out their roles without passion or enthusiasm, that they lack the energy and primal innocence inherent in such activity in the context of the idyllic wilderness. The fish puts up only the fight it is contracted for and then just gives up, as if living in such a place is not worth fighting for. And what a fish it is!

He was a trout. But he was green. I never saw one like him before. He had green sides with black trout spots, a greenish head, and like a green stomach. He was the color of moss, that color green. It was if he had been wrapped up in moss a long time, and the color had come off all over him. He was fat, and I wondered why he hadn't put up more of a fight. I wondered if he was all right. I looked at him for a time longer, then I put him out of his pain. (49-50)

Such a fish appears as an abomination against nature set beside the silvery beauties which Nick Adams pulls from the sparkling clear streams of his youth. This fish is a mutant, a specimen, its colors mark it as a product of an unhealthy environment. No doubt the water that flows into the river through the culvert which the narrator notices is contaminated with pesticides and other chemical by-products of civilization. Petrochemicals from the airport leach through the soil and make their way into the stream. The fish who inhabit the stream are immersed in a

chemical brew which plays havoc with their genetic structure and metabolic processes, producing lethargic monsters, just as the people who live in the surrounding area are immersed in a poisonous atmosphere of confusion and incomprehensibility which threatens to make monsters of their children.<sup>30</sup>

However, the boy is incapable of such thoughts himself, and ugly as it may be the fish is still a catch, so he puts it in his creel. Moving down towards the bridge for a few last casts before starting home, the narrator spots "a kid about George's size running down the bank" (50). The obvious excitement which the kid displays compels the narrator to investigate. The kid himself is depicted as a grotesque figure, an analogue to the fish who inhabit this stream: "He looked like a rat or something. I mean, he had buck teeth and skinny arms and this ragged longsleeved shirt that was too small for him" (51).<sup>31</sup> What the kid points to, "the biggest fish [he] ever saw," makes the narrator's heart jump. This fish, "as long as [his] arm," excites him so much that he brings forth an epithet worthy of Nick Adams: "God almighty." What

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<sup>30</sup> This poisonous atmosphere has an actual physical locus in the story. On his way fishing the narrator remarks: "At night they would light the smudgepots in the orchards and you would wake up in the morning with a black ring of stuff in your nose. But nobody said anything. They said the smudging kept the young pears from freezing, so it was all right" (45).

<sup>31</sup> Henry Carlile argues that the "motley appearance of [this] boy, and his obvious poverty, recall the appearance of a mythological trickster whose special powers are often required to help accomplish the hero's task" (156). When "Nobody Said Anything" was first published as "The Summer Steelhead" in *The Seneca Review*, it contained abundant medieval quest imagery which paralleled the contemporary images (Marcus 60). Traces of this imagery still exist in the final version of the story--mainly in the use of the idea of a "journey perilous" which must end with the hero killing a monster "in order to acquire its magical powers and restore the world to its original vigorous state and so end the strife, drought, sterility, and pestilence that lay it waste" (Carlile 156).

more can he say? He has come across something in this day of disappointments which is capable of filling him with a sense of wonder that is almost worthy of the wilderness idyll. But the moment of contemplation does not last long--soon the two boys are devising a plan to catch this monster. Their frantic attempts are described in great detail and the results are comic. The process is described in a breathless stream of narration, punctuated with scatological exclamations, revealing how deeply this stuff is ingrained in the narrator's consciousness. They plan to "kick the living shit" out of the fish, which is "scared shitless". The fish knows "it's tough shit" (52) and the kid with a club is an "asshole." Such profanity, and the slapstick physical comedy of the boys' frantic attempts at catching the big fish, return us to a profoundly degraded version of the idyllic wilderness. Each of the boys projects a putative ownership onto the fish before they have even caught it. The younger boy is embarrassed by the narrator's criticism of his technique, and when they organize themselves for a second try he has "a terrible look of cold in his face" (53). What they are doing has little to do with fishing; the act of violence they engage themselves in seems to embody all the frustration and confusion of their young lives. It is the narrator who finally lays his hands on the fish:

. . . it was coming right at me. He tried to turn when he saw me, but it was too late. I went down on my knees, grasping in the cold water. I scooped him with my hands and arms, up, up, raising him, throwing him out

of the water, both of us falling onto the bank. I held him against my shirt, him flopping and twisting, until I could get my hands up his slippery sides to his gills. I ran one hand in and clawed through to his mouth and locked around his jaw. I knew I had him. He was still flopping and hard to hold, but I had him and I wasn't going to let go. (54)

The narrator seems to be describing a parody of mortal combat, as if the fish out of water is not for all intents and purposes already dead. There is a note of desperation in his partner's voice as he approaches: "Oh God, let me hold him." The fish itself is another monster, "at least two feet long, queerly skinny . . . too skinny for how long he was, and you could hardly see the pink stripe down his sides, and his belly was gray and slack instead of white and solid like it should have been" (55). Neither of the boys realizes the cruel joke which has been played on them, that this "gigantic summer steelhead" (59), covered in "whitish welts as big as quarters" (55), is a diseased specimen.<sup>32</sup>

Still, each of the boys wants the fish for himself. The younger boy wants "to show [it] to [his] dad so bad" (57). Although the narrator knows he could take the fish if he wanted to, he "didn't want to fight" (58). So instead the boys hack the fish in two. They disagree about who should get the half with the head,

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<sup>32</sup> Henry Carlile points out that "it is clear from Carver's exact description that the fish is spawned out, dark, and fungally diseased. A passage in the original version of the story ["The Summer Steelhead"] . . . makes this point explicit: 'He was probably upstream spawning, and he's just late getting back to the river'" (157).

and finally the narrator offers the younger boy "the green trout and the tail part" (59) for the head part.

When the narrator returns home he walks into the middle of "yet another argument, but he is secure in the belief that somehow his victory will not only establish his manhood but also rescue his family from malaise" (Saltzman 37). But the narrator's offering does not have the desired effect of altering for the better the atmosphere in his house; instead his father orders him to "Take it the hell out of the kitchen and throw it in the goddamn garbage!" (59) The story ends with the boy holding the fish "under the porch light,"<sup>33</sup> and if the fish is, as Arthur M. Saltzman claims, "a prodigious phallic symbol for a boy who prizes potency" (37), then it is an apt symbol for this boy in particular, who appears doomed to grow up with a warped and monstrous view of human sexual relationships. The father is dead wrong when he implies that none of what goes on in the house affects the children ("What do kids know? You'll see" (58)), they are watching everything, and the poisonous atmosphere there has already affected their development. Compared to this, the strains in the relationship

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<sup>33</sup> Ewing Campbell, in *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction*, reads the end of "Nobody Said Anything" as a kind of "symbolic redemption" (9). Campbell sees the temporary deflection of the parents' anger with each other effected by the introduction of the fish into the house as much more significant than I do. He also casts the final image of the story, the boy holding the fish, in a light which I do not think the story supports: "Lovingly, triumphantly, because the fish has provided the temporary means to stop his parents' fighting, he lifts and embraces it" (9). Henry Carlile's reading of the ending is in line with Campbell's. He argues that: "Somewhere else, the other boy is holding up his half--the fruits of compromise and sharing rather than of conquest. Something has been gained after all, and the narrator has made an important break from his destructive family" (159). Saltzman and Randolph Paul Runyon, on the other hand, read the tone of the ending as I do.



between the father and mother in the Nick Adams stories appears almost benign, although the father's suicide cannot be dismissed too lightly.<sup>34</sup>

"The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off" is another early story which uses aspects of the idyllic wilderness to achieve its effects. Originally published as "Dummy" in *Furious Seasons*, "Third Thing" then appeared in reduced form in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and was collected in *Where I'm Calling From*. According to Arthur M. Saltzman, "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off" is an initiation story for the narrator, who is twelve at the time of the story's occurrence, for his father and for the character named Dummy (77). The story represents an attempt on the part of the narrator to come to an understanding of the events which lead to the deaths of Dummy and his father, the former in particular signalling "the end of [his] extraordinarily long childhood, sending [him] forth, ready or not, into the world of men--where defeat and death are more in the natural order of

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<sup>34</sup> Carver talks about the origins of "Nobody Said Anything" in an interview with Kay Bonetti in 1983: "On one fishing trip when I was a kid I did catch a trout that was pretty green. I had never seen a trout quite like it, and it was eight or ten inches long. On a separate fishing trip I did see a fish which we called a summer steelhead, a steelhead trout that had gone to the ocean and come back up into fresh water and had gotten into a small creek and gotten stranded up there. But I didn't do anything. I didn't catch that fish. On yet another occasion I did halve a fish with another kid. It wasn't a steelhead trout. It was a sturgeon, about a ten-pound sturgeon, that had inexplicably gotten up into this creek. We yanked him up and we divided that fish. The rest of the story was put together as stories are put together, like a snowball rolling downhill. You know, things get added in the process of the rolling. That was when I was a kid and somehow there are these deeply rooted things that you don't forget and that go way back with you. Those circumstances, that particular time in my life, made a very large claim on my attention when I was in my early thirties" (60-61).

things" (*Furious Seasons* 9).<sup>35</sup> Dummy, who as his name suggests is deaf and dumb and not particularly bright (although the narrator does not "think he was really deaf. At least not as deaf as he made out" (*What We Talk About* 90)), worked with the narrator's father at the Cascade Lumber Company in Yakima, Washington. The father, who grew up in Arkansas and Georgia (92), misses fishing for bass, and it was he who "showed Dummy the ad in the back of *Field and Stream* for live black bass shipped anywhere in the U.S." (89). The father hopes that his status as Dummy's only friend at the mill, or at least his "one relatively sympathetic acquaintance" (Saltzman 78), will mean that Dummy will allow him to fish at Dummy's pond with his son when the time comes. But something happens to Dummy when he opens the first of the three crates and sees "a million bass fingerlings . . . finning inside" (93). After this first glimpse he will not allow the narrator and his father to help anymore with the crates, and later "wouldn't let anyone come around. . . . He put up fencing all around the pasture, and then he fenced off the pond with electrical barbed wire." Exactly why Dummy chooses to close himself off from the one man who is at least kind to him is unclear. Saltzman suggests that "Perhaps Dummy has decided to exert a possessive influence over this portion of his life, [because his wife has] apparently . . . escaped his control; perhaps it is a matter of salvaging something he loves from contamination or injury" (78).

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<sup>35</sup> This passage is cut from later versions of the story, following the general line and logic of Carver's revisions, where such interpretive material is excised in order to let the situations speak for themselves without narrative assistance.

Two years pass before the narrator's father "finally made Dummy do it" (94):

What he did was, he told Dummy how you had to thin out the weak ones on account of keeping things fit for the rest of them. Dummy stood there pulling at his ear and staring at the floor. Dad said, Yeah, he'd be down to do it tomorrow because it had to be done. Dummy never said yes, actually. He just never said no, is all. All he did was pull on his ear some more.

Despite the fact that the fishing expedition is based on a deception, a taking advantage of someone who is not capable of offering a rational response to the slick generalizations offered up by the father, it still starts out well. Even though it is, as Saltzman observes, "a contrived event" (78), it still contains enough of the magic associated with certain aspects of the wilderness idyll to bring out epithets worthy of Nick Adams. "Oh, Lord, look at that!" the father shouts when he first catches a glimpse of "the sheen of the water" (96). When they get close enough to see the whole pond, "the water [is] dimpled with rising fish. Every so often a bass would leap clear and come down in a splash." The words which these characters are capable of uttering cannot do justice to the sight, and to what they feel looking at it: it is "as though the poetry inherent in the leap of a fish . . . outdoes language" (Saltzman 76), or at least outdoes the language that these guys are capable of. The vision before them evokes constant reference to divinity ("Great God"); the fish are a kind of ontological proof of

the existence of a divine power, something which is certainly not evident in the everyday world of these characters.

The narrator is "shaky with excitement" (97) as he prepares for his first cast. He sends "her out a good forty feet" (98) and immediately hooks one of the bass. The narrator's description of the ensuing battle is a marvel of clarity:

The bass danced around the pond. Every time it came up out of the water, it shook its head so hard you could hear the plug rattle. And then he'd take off again. But by and by I wore him out and had him in up close. He looked enormous, six or seven pounds maybe. He lay on his side, whipped, mouth open, gills working. My knees felt so weak I could hardly stand. But I held the rod up, the line tight. (98)

Here is the one positive aspect of the wilderness idyll in the story --the opportunity which certain activities associated with the wilderness give one to truly be within oneself for a short period of time. During the narrator's precise description about how it feels to bring in one's first bass, his time becomes ours; the durations of the story and the reading experience become intertwined in a vital way. Everything is right there, nothing left external to the description. But then the father steps into the pond to grab the fish and Dummy intervenes. At this last moment he decides that he cannot allow the sanctity of the pond to be violated, and the moment's hesitation he causes allows the bass to regain some of its strength:

He turned himself over and started swimming again. I yelled and then I lost my head and slammed down the brake on the reel and started winding. The bass made a last, furious run.

That was that. The line broke. I almost fell over on my back. (99)

The narrator's father is furious. He feels that Dummy has betrayed him somehow, that he has been victimized by Dummy's stinginess with "his darlings." The father breaks off all relations with Dummy over the incident. And yet, when in "February the river flooded," after a Chinook wind melted the heavy snowpack, and Dummy's pond is engulfed by the rising waters, the narrator's father cannot help but feel a little sorry for him too: "Mind, the poor fellow brought it on himself. But you can't help but be troubled for him" (101). After this natural disaster, everything starts to fall apart for Dummy. He starts to react to the men's harassment at work, and to miss days altogether. Everything comes to a head when Dummy beats his wife to death with a hammer and drowns himself. The narrator is present to witness the authorities' grisly catch: "The man in the back stood up and started heaving on his rope. After a time, an arm came out of the water. It looked like the hooks had gotten Dummy in the side. The arm went back down and then it came out again, along with a bundle of something" (103). The explanation which the narrator's father offers him is not convincing: "That's what the wrong kind of woman can do to you, Jack." The narrator does not really think

that his father believes this, "he just didn't know who to blame or what to say."

Dummy embodies one of the most extreme examples of an obsession which runs throughout Carver's fiction, the inability of people to articulate their feelings and to make sense of their world. Although the father here is neither deaf nor dumb, he is almost as inept as Dummy at trying to explain to himself the world and his place in it--he cannot for the life of him understand why "everything took a bad turn" after Dummy's death. The cold-hearted and detached way in which the narrator attempts to explain his father's decline in terms of three discrete events in his life<sup>36</sup> overlooks the fact that all these events are part of a larger story, a story which he, like his father, lacks the ability to read.

The most important way in which the wilderness idyll comes into play in this story concerns the idea of private property, which is suggested by Dummy's claim to ownership of the bass that fill his pond. The very fact that the fish are even there is contrived by man and thus artificial, and yet once the fish are there they take on the qualities of wild creatures, indistinguishable in most respects from animals whose origins are truly natural and authentic. Dummy has a legal right to restrict or deny access to the fish since the ponds they live in are located on his property. However, he has a moral obligation to share the

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<sup>36</sup> The story begins: "I'll tell you what did my father in. The third thing was Dummy, that Dummy died. The first thing was Pearl Harbor. And the second thing was moving to my grandfather's farm near Wenatchee. That's where my father finished out his days, except they were probably finished before that" (89).

bounty with the man who suggested the idea to him out of friendship. It is a perversion of the spirit of the idyllic wilderness to not allow the narrator's father to fish in the pond with his son. But Dummy is infected with a strange possessiveness, akin to the spirit of monopoly capitalism, which makes him loathe to share the magic of his pond with anyone else, even with the one man who would be his friend. Dummy's greed, his desire to keep the beauty of his bass all to himself, is his tragic flaw.

Another story which concerns concepts of property and the wilderness idyll is "Sixty Acres," from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*<sup>37</sup> The main character of this story is a native American, which makes him unique among Carver's protagonists. The conflict in the story "unfolds against the backdrop of racial dispossession" (Saltzman 37), and in particular the dispossession of a certain claim to connection with the land. Lee Waite's problems begin with the fact that he lives on one part of the reserve, but "owns" sixty acres on another part. He is informed by Joseph Eagle, "an old Indian who lived on his government allotment in a little place" (*Will You Please* 60) near this property that hunters are trespassing there. Joseph Eagle reminds Lee Waite that it is "the third or fourth time this winter someone had been in there," and implies that Lee would be less than a man if he did not do something about it. But Lee feels "as much burdened as justified by his Indian heritage and the reservation territory it guarantees

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<sup>37</sup> This story must not have been a favorite of Carver's, since it never appeared in any of his later collections. It is the only story discussed in this chapter which only appeared in the one book.

him. He wishes he did not have to respond to the call about trespassing duck hunters on his land because it threatens to expose the breakdown of his authority" (Saltzman 38). This authority has less to do with European concepts about the private ownership of land than with the claim to use of the land based on an authentic, living relationship with it. Lee fears that he has lost this claim to the land, and the lifelessness of his existence is captured in the description of his cabin, which strikes one as more of an internment cell for superfluous people than a place where humans live:

The porch, small and built on just before the war, was almost dark. The one window glass had been knocked out years before, and Waite had nailed a beet sack over the opening. It hung there next to the cabinet, matted-thick and frozen, moving slightly as the cold air from outside came in around the edges. The walls were crowded with old yokes and harnesses, and up on one side, above the window, was a row of rusted hand tools. (61)

The description gives one a sense that little gets done here, needed repairs are not carried out and the tools for the job rust from lack of use. An air of demoralization hangs over the cabin.

When Lee arrives at the place where the hunters have parked their car, he realizes that "He had not been down there to do anything in four or five years. . . . He could not understand where all the time had gone" (65). Native concepts of property are



very different from modern European ones. They are not based on the principle of one man owning a piece of land, but on the idea of a people using an area, deriving their livelihoods from it, and it is this use through time, not necessarily constant settlement and inhabitation so much as an intermittent or periodic use, which constitutes their claim to aboriginal title. Lee realizes in his heart of hearts that his unwillingness to use this land constitutes an abrogation of his claim to this land, if not in a strictly legal sense at least in a moral one. The sense of malaise which infects Lee and his people has to do with both their physical and temporal alienation from the land. The land was never meant to be chopped into neat little units. Standing there, Lee "remembered when he was little, wanting to grow up. He used to come down here often then and trap this part of the creek for muskrat and set night-lines for German brown. . . . All that was a long time ago." Lee has fallen out the rhythms of the land, and thus having to enforce his legal rights over the use of this land seems to him "a distasteful duty," as meaningless as his habit of locking his gates after himself despite the fact that he no longer owns any horses. If he still felt an authentic claim to this land he might feel justified in using the threat of violence to defend it against intruders, but as it is his sons' excitement about the prospect of him shooting somebody makes him uneasy: "It bothered him, kids talking like that, like they would have enjoyed it. . ." (61). One senses that these boys have not even received indoctrination into the mysteries of the land, as Lee would have from his father and

grandfather--instead they have learned what they know about the world from television and movies. Lee knows firsthand what can come of violence; the fact that he is sole owner of this land is the direct result of it: "Growing up, he had heard his father say he intended this land for the three boys. But both brothers had been killed. Lee Waite was the one it came down to, all of it" (65).

When the hunters, who are only boys, return to their car, Lee surprises them. The boys know they have been caught red-handed, their game pockets stuffed full of ducks, and they are afraid. Despite the fact that Lee appears to be in complete control of the situation, "His voice sounded strange to him, light, insubstantial" (67). It is as if he hears the lack of an authentic claim to this land--the only thing which could possibly justify his holding these two boys at gunpoint--in his own voice. The boys seem to recognize this, and although they are genuinely frightened they still have enough nerve to blatantly lie about their names. Lee's sense of alienation from himself is again evident when, "shocking himself" (68), he starts to yell at the boys: "You come onto my land and shoot my ducks and then you lie like hell to me!" (69). Lee appears like an actor reading a script which he knows by heart, one which he has been preparing a long time while always loathing the possibility of actually performing it: the angry landowner confronting trespassers.

That Lee is not fully engaged in this anger, that it is somehow less than a fully authentic state of rage, is apparent in how he seems to remain outside himself, able to think "of Joseph

Eagle sitting up there in his lighted house, his feet on a box, listening to the radio," while yelling at the boys. Lee is angry, but his anger has as much to do with an overwhelming sense of frustration about what his life has become, and his inability to truly understand for himself exactly what it has become, as it does with these boys stealing his ducks. As he watches the boys disappear down the road, he thinks to himself: "He had put them off the land. That was all that mattered. Yet he could not understand why he felt something crucial had happened, a failure. But nothing had happened" (69-70). His vague feeling that something significant has happened to him is very similar to how Mr. Harold feels at the end of "Pastoral." Both men feel that they have missed some sort of opportunity to do something which would make them feel better about themselves--Mr. Harold refers to it as "Something Heroic" ("Pastoral" 42). And yet both men do just about what any reasonable person would do in their respective situations. It is as if they wish they had whatever it takes within themselves not to do the reasonable thing, to surprise themselves by breaking out of their passive, victims' roles and taking the initiative.

When Lee returns to his house, he finds his wife waiting up for him. It is a "small house" (70), so there is no escape. He must talk about it. She reassures him that he "did what was right" (71), but he is not sure. "He tried to think about it, but already it seemed as if it had happened, whatever it was, long ago" (71-72). He feels that maybe he "should've given them more of a scare"

(72), that he "could've killed them." But these are just empty words and thoughts, after the fact. Instead of defending land to which he no longer feels connected, he now proposes to symbolically surrender it to those who will at least use it:

I was thinking maybe I'll lease out that land down there to the hunting clubs. No good to us down there like that. Is it? Our house was down there or it was our land right out here in front would be something different, right? [. . .] That's some of the best hunting land in the valley. . . . If I could put it to some use someday, it would be different then.

Nina is willing to allow him to do whatever he wants with the land, although she does need to be reassured that leasing the land does not mean the same thing as selling it. Only his mother's silence might be interpreted as a reproach of his decision.

Saltzman says her "cryptic presence looms like judgement over the Waite household" (38), although it could be just as easily argued that she looms as an emblem of superfluousness, drifting in and out of a life in which she no longer has any purpose.

Despite his attempts to rationalize his decision, Lee seems to have had his grounding to the world destabilized by it:

He crossed his arms and tried to think. His legs began to tremble, and he leaned against the wall. He rested there and then let his weight slide gently down the wall until he was squatting.

"It's just a lease," he said.

He stared at the floor. It seemed to slant in his direction; it seemed to move. (74)

Lee's decision to use his land for profit, and thus to sanction the use of the land by others who have even less of a claim to it than he, who instead of a birthright offer money as justification for its use, affects him physically. He suffers the kind of disorientation which accompanies betrayal. He is turning his back on his past, on the fragments of a legacy which have been passed down to him through the many generations of his ancestors who lived on this land before him, in order to pursue a course of assimilation, or perhaps it would be more fair to state that he finally accepts the inevitability of assimilation and decides to stop resisting it. He feels himself to be less Indian than American, and knows his children will be less Indian yet. The grandmother is a living reminder of what was, a connection to a world where Lee's ancestors had a real, living relationship to the wilderness, and she can be read as either a quiet rebuke to her son or as a symbol of the tenuousness of that connection, which becomes weaker with each passing day.

**E. Supplement: A Brief Consideration of the Wilderness  
Idyll in Raymond Carver's Poetry**

The themes which Carver uses to construct a degraded version of the idyllic wilderness in his fiction appear in his poetry as well. For example, the poem "Deschutes River" (*Fires* 126) suggests the idea of the wilderness as a refuge from the trials of domesticity and urban life. In "Deschutes River" the speaker of the poem turns from his observations of the environment as habitat for wild creatures, the badger with "blood on its snout up to its sharp eyes," whose "prowess is not to be confused / with grace" and the "eight mallard ducks [that] fly over / without looking down," to the human presence:

Frank Sandmeyer trolls, trolls  
for steelhead. He has fished  
this river for years  
but February is the best month  
he says.  
Snarled, mittenless,  
I handle a maze of nylon.  
Far away--  
another man is raising my children,  
bedding my wife bedding my wife.

The speaker evokes a sense of the continuity of the wilderness idyll in the figure of the fisherman who returns here year after year. He may not live here, but his knowing that this place is

where it should be provides him with a sense of comfort when he is away. There is also a sense of one kind of wilderness time remarked already at various points in the repetition of the verb "trolls." Repetition of the aspects of an activity is a positive attribute in the wilderness idyll--part of the attraction of fishing is doing the same thing over and over again and never tiring of it. Whereas in urban life repetition is seen as the inevitable precursor to boredom, in the wilderness one takes pride in doing small things well, in taking control of things which one can control rather than fantasizing about having control over things which one can rarely wrap one's mind around, let alone one's will. Joy is found in the process itself, no matter how mundane it may seem to the jaded observer, rather than in the idea of elusive goals which are predicated by the subject's thinking about the process. But here the speaker of the poem is not able to emulate the total involvement of Frank Sandmeyer in the moment at hand, and his attention slips towards a consideration of those things which he cannot control, the aspects of his private life which he has come to the river to escape.

Another poem, "The Catch" (*Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* 105), again demonstrates the perfection of being-in-the-moment which the activity of fishing, contained within the context of the idyllic wilderness, makes possible:

He had to concentrate,  
close everything else out  
for a change. His old life,

which he carried around  
like a pack. And the new one,  
that one too. Time and again  
he made what he felt were the most  
intimate of human movements.  
Strained his heart to see  
the difference between a raindrop  
and a brook trout. Later,  
walking across the wet field  
to the car. Watching  
the wind change the aspen trees.  
He abandoned everyone  
he once loved.

The man described in the poem is more alive at this moment than he is habitually accustomed to being. In the extreme focus which he achieves here he is capable of making the most subtle discriminations. But this skill applies only to what and who he is in the context of the wilderness--as soon as his consciousness turns to consider the world beyond stream and field it turns into a blunt and savage instrument, capable of only the most crude gestures of displacement and denial. It would be one thing if the serenity he achieved in the wilderness were to spill over into his assessment of his other lives, but it is another thing altogether to merely desire to abandon these lives and all the people who are involved in them. The wilderness idyll should work to bring people together rather than to put them apart.



The idyllic wilderness is degraded in the stories and poems of Raymond Carver because the people he represents as coming into contact with the wilderness and the values it represents are for the most part degraded human beings to begin with. Carver admits to a weakness for survivors, for characters who in spite of the incomprehensibility of their world somehow manage to keep on keeping on. A perfect symbol of this attribute is the eyeless fish which appear in the dreams of the speaker of the poem "The Current" (*Fires* 120). One of these fish in particular stands apart:

. . . heavy, scarred, silent like the rest,  
 that simply hold against the current,  
 closing its dark mouth against  
 the current, closing and opening  
 as it holds to the current.

The fact that the fish is eyeless obviously suggests an inability to see, but more particularly an inability to see beyond the immediate moment.<sup>38</sup> In his book *The Minimal Self*, Christopher Lasch characterizes the survivor as someone who "keeps his eyes fixed on the road just in front of him. He shores up fragments against his ruin. His life consists of isolated acts and events. It has no story, no pattern, no structure as an unfolding narrative" (96). By keeping one's eyes tightly focussed just in front of where one is, one effectively blinds oneself to the context of position, to all

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<sup>38</sup> Marc Chenetier says: "Blind and silent, the fish of this poem is content with such provoked balance of forces as its minimal, repititious, and non-affirmative stemming gesture can afford. . ." (185).

the factors which would help to explain one's situation.<sup>39</sup> Whereas the figure which a fish cuts in Hemingway's Nick Adams stories suggests a kind of freedom, the possibility of life outside the world of domesticity, in Carver's stories the fish tend to be an image which a character takes home with him, hoping that it will provide something to help him carry on when the going gets tough, or even merely tedious. To celebrate mere survival is to resign oneself to living in a world which is beyond hope, a world in which the best which can be imagined is a slight amelioration of circumstances, in which all utopian dreams have been quashed by the heavy boots of determinism.<sup>40</sup>

And yet despite all the degradations which the wilderness idyll has suffered, it survives and continues to have meaning beyond the mere fact of its existence. In an early poem, "Near Klamath" (*Fires* 101), we can see how the activity of fishing makes possible a rudimentary form of community, and a language for men to communicate their hidden longing for transcendence:

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<sup>39</sup> "Equally blind and silenced by impoverished languages fed them by the media that fascinates them and shapes their reactions" (Chenetier 185).

<sup>40</sup> Eugene Goodheart defends Carver against all those readers who wish to see his characters rebel against the circumstances of their lives by referring to Hemingway: "In his first collection of stories, *In Our Time*, Hemingway presented characters, not unlike Carver's in their terseness, who refused to act up to feelings that they didn't have. The false note for Carver, as for Hemingway, is supposing yourself to be other than you are" (25). Two positions about what constitutes moral fiction are suggested here: one which contents itself to represent things as they are, with the greatest accuracy and integrity; the other which strives to show how things might be if people were able to overcome their prejudices, habits, culture. Neither is indisputably right--despite what critics on either side of the debate say there is room for both.

We stand around the burning oil drum  
and we warm ourselves, our hands  
and faces, in its pure lapping heat.

We raise steaming cups of coffee  
to our lips and we drink it  
with both hands. But we are salmon

fishermen. And now we stamp our feet  
on the snow and rocks and move upstream,  
slowly, full of love, toward the still pools.

The vision of the men gathered around the burning oil drum first suggests an urban slum scene--homeless men seeking warmth and sustenance. The stamping of feet suggests that they are prisoners of a sort, one imagines them manacled together. But as salmon fishermen, no matter what else they may be in their other lives, they are filled with the mysterious longing which draws them to pools full of salmon. Their experience may not be that of Nick Adams, or of the aboriginal peoples who incorporated the salmon into a coherent cosmological explanation of the world, but neither is it something to be dismissed altogether. These men may not be capable of articulating the meaning of the wilderness idyll themselves, but they are a demonstration of its existence. The wilderness idyll is a psycho-social construct, an organic outgrowth of a displaced longing for a place which is familiar and yet still retains an essential mystery. It is in Carver, as in Hemingway, a

male place, but a place where men might shed their group identities in order to become something more genuine than they feel they are in their workaday lives. The poems show more clearly than the stories the utopian traces of the idyll which run through even a degraded wilderness. The wilderness as concept is intertwined with the idea of origins, and as such inspires mythological thinking, although as we have seen in the stories, in contemporary America the tendency to mythologize is always deconstructed by the historical.

#### IV. Alienation and the Grotesque Body in the Fiction of Franz Kafka and Raymond Carver

"Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual's life in its more important moments of *crisis*, for showing *how an individual becomes other than what he was.*"

-M.M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." (115).

In the preceding chapter we have observed how Carver's fiction exploits the existence of a pre-existing idyll of the American wilderness in the construction of place which provides the setting for some of the early stories, and how these ideas of place contribute to the atmosphere and the significance of individual stories. We were able to see how the wilderness idyll functions in Carver's fiction by challenging readers' expectations about what they would expect to find happening in the wilderness setting, and how the deflation of readers' expectations, itself a synecdoche for the historical process of the degradation of the idyll, establishes a profound sense of alienation as the dominant mood in Carver's early fiction. In one of the most striking stories discussed there, "Nobody Said Anything," we can remark upon the existence of another area intimately connected with the degraded

wilderness idyll, the grotesque body. In "Nobody Said Anything" the un-named narrator is to a very significant degree subject to demands which his body makes upon him, mainly centered on auto-erotic satisfaction of immature, poorly-defined sexual needs.

In the fictional world(s) created by Raymond Carver the body has lost its connection to folk-culture, to the amorphous unity which constitutes folk-life. Bakhtin argues, in *Rabelais and His World*, that "the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19-20). By the time that Carver enters literary realism the grotesque has already undergone a profound transformation, and exists only in traces. Romanticism had privatized bodily experience, making it entirely subjective, and this helped to transform the world into a terrifying place which laughter could not overcome. As Bakhtin explains, in the romantic grotesque all "that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile" (39). The individual becomes isolated in his or her own body rather than connecting to the whole of humanity through it.

The treatment of the body in Carver's fiction, noticeably in the early fiction, bears a strong resemblance to Kafka's treatment of the body. In many of Carver's early stories we get a sense of the body as "the most forgotten alien land," as Walter Benjamin refers to it in the longer of his two essays on Kafka (132). Two of

Kafka's shorter works, "The Metamorphosis" and "The Hunger Artist," are particularly significant to an understanding of Kafka's treatment of the body. Between them these two stories seem to define a modernist version of the body, setting in opposition its paradoxical limitations, rooted in materiality, and its desires for transcendence. What is most striking in this modernist version, is the body's capacity to master and subjugate the consciousness which western culture usually presumes to be primary--in other words, Kafka's metaphysics, such as they are, are anti-Platonic, and are opposed to the primacy of essential forms over specific existents.

One might argue that the early Carver story "The Hair" (1963), which was never included in any of his major-press books in his lifetime, has the same kind of relationship to Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" as his "Pastoral" does to Hemingway's "Big Two Hearted River." "The Hair" was originally written for Richard Day's class at Humboldt State College, and published in *Toyon*, the college literary magazine (Stull, "Raymond Carver Remembered" 466-68). Day later said that this story "marked him as a writer," and William L. Stull claims that it was the first story to fully achieve what would become the characteristic Carverian "synthesis of simplicity and strangeness" (468). In both Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and Carver's "The Hair," the protagonists undergo a transformation during the night preceding the opening of the story. Although the nature of the transformation itself is

particular to the situation in which it occurs, in both cases it tends to work toward the defamiliarization of experience, the disruption of the routine of everyday life, and the isolation of the protagonist from those who surround him. Finally, the very nature of the transformation, the question of its ontological veracity--whether or not it is a true material phenomenon in the world of the story or only a figment of imagination, an ephemeral product of consciousness itself--is clear in neither story. Ultimately, these stories are models of alienation which human beings derive from the ambiguity of their relationships to their own bodies.

Just as one senses that "Pastoral" represents a diminished version of "Big Two-Hearted River," one recognizes, in placing together the opening of "The Metamorphosis" and "The Hair," just how deeply ingrained the trope of diminishment is in Carver's fictional art. In "The Metamorphosis," the nature of Gregor Samsa's transformation is so dramatic and strange that it tests the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were



pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes. (89)

In contrast to the undeniable extremity of the transformation which Gregor Samsa has undergone during the night, that which the un-named protagonist of "The Hair" undergoes is so subtle that at first it is not even readily apparent that this is to be understood as a radical change in his life conditions--rather it is more in the manner of an annoyance:

He worked at it with his tongue for a while then sat up in bed and began picking at it with his fingers. Outside it was going to be a nice day and some birds were singing. He tore off a corner of the matchbook and scraped in between his teeth. Nothing. He could still feel it. He ran his tongue over his teeth again from back to front, stopping when he got to the hair. He touched all around it then stroked it with his tongue where it threaded in between two of the front teeth, followed it an inch or so to the end and smoothed it against the roof of his mouth. He touched it with his finger. (*No Heroics, Please* 43)<sup>1</sup>

Although it might be argued that the writing here is not up to the standards of Carver's later work (there is definitely something of

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<sup>1</sup> David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips, authors of one of the earliest studies of Carver's fiction, write: "what Kafka projects through the lens of a nightmarish reality, Carver, at his most distinctive, forces us to see through the most conventional and habitual experiences of everyday life. It is the familiar, the seemingly 'known,' which is the true mask of the terrifying" (83).

the fiction-writing seminar in this story), the story itself is still interesting in how it lays bare the components of Carver's fiction-making apparatus--the machinic assemblage which he will take such great pains to hide in his more mature work. Despite the fact that the action which the narrator describes is fraught with tension, "the narrator's voice remains level and restrained" (Stull 468). The utter banality of the detail which impinges on the protagonist's consciousness, the birds singing outside, are the kind of convention of fiction which would seem to indicate that the narrator is concerned with rendering an objective account of subjective phenomena (the birds singing outside signify that this is a day like any other, a perfectly normal, *good* day, *except* for this other business), with fulfilling what Georg Lukacs sees as the twofold task of the realist writer: "First, the uncovering and artistic shaping of . . . the connections within social reality . . . and secondly . . . the artistic covering of the connections that have been worked out abstractly--the sublation of the abstraction".<sup>2</sup> This artistic covering "is nothing other than the creation of the appearance of nature" (Buerger 72), whereby the "organic work of art seeks to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made." The narrator controls the language of the narration in such a way that all abstract interpretation of the phenomena which the protagonist experiences is negated and yet remains present in latent form.

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<sup>2</sup> "Es geht um den Realismus." *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation*. Ed. F.J. Raddatz. Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1969. Vol. 2, p. 69f (quoted in Buerger 72).

Obviously the hair is already experienced as a profoundly disturbing incursion into the world of the protagonist, even if he does not come out and say this explicitly. What Carver does in this story, and in his fiction as a whole (excepting perhaps some of the later, "transcendental" stories), is very similar to something which Deleuze and Guattari see Kafka doing in his stories--using narrative to deterritorialize language, to push it in the direction of utter sobriety and understatement (what Barthes calls "writing degree zero"<sup>3</sup>): "Since the language [Kafka's Prague German<sup>4</sup>] is arid, make it vibrate with a new intensity. Oppose a purely intensive use of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it. Arrive at a perfect and unformed expression, a materially intense expression" (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 19).<sup>5</sup> It would be too easy just to propose that the hair is a symbolic representation of some abstract, onto-

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<sup>3</sup> ". . . the zero degree of writing . . . represents the last episode of a Passion of writing, which recounts stage by stage the disintegration of bourgeois consciousness" (5).

<sup>4</sup> The language of domination, the official language of business in Kafka's Prague, which assumes a position of superiority over the languages of the Czech countryside and the ethnic language of the Jewish minority (Yiddish). It is my belief that Carver's colloquial American-English, the language of the disenfranchised lower and middle classes, represents, like Kafka's Prague German, a subversive appropriation of official language which attempts to liberate itself from the means-ends commodification of reality which the official language authorizes. In this way Carver's fiction can be understood as constituting a minor literature, as Deleuze and Guattari argue that Kafka's does.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note here that Deleuze and Guattari describe Kafka's method, which they describe throughout their study as a profoundly experimental approach to fiction, as a recipe or set of instructional imperatives, a strategy exploited by proponents of the historical avant-garde, such as Tzara (instructions for making a Dadaist poem) and Breton (for the writing of automatic texts). Buerger states that this strategy "represents not only a polemical attack on the individual creativity of the artist . . . but . . . part of a liberating life praxis" (53).

theological concept. It is much more difficult and demanding, and yet intellectually rigorous and fruitful,<sup>6</sup> to see the hair as the incursion of a radical sense of materiality into the consciousness of the protagonist. It certainly does not make itself known to him in the first instance as anything more than the pure perception of a thing, and more than that, as the perception of a thing which he is unable to identify or recognize the precise nature of. It is only for convenience's sake that he refers to it as the hair. It "feels like a hair" (Carver 43), but even after the protagonist goes into the bathroom to look for it in the mirror, he is unable to see it, to verify visually the physical existence of the thing he feels in his mouth: "I can't see it but I know it's there. If I could just get hold of it maybe I could pull it out" (43). Whereas Kafka uses a sober and arid language in order to downplay the shock a reader would feel as witness to the radical transformation in the first paragraph of "The Metamorphosis," and thus to try to bring the fantastic events of the narrative down into the realm of the ordinary and the plausible (keeping a straight face while exaggerating, so to speak), Carver uses a similarly uninflected language in order to achieve quite a different fictional effect. The laconic language of the narrator in Carver's story helps to defer the reader's expectation of a more dramatic significance than is introduced in the first paragraph of "The Hair." A tension is created, wherein the

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<sup>6</sup> Not to mention more appropriate to a recognition of Carver's minimalism as a neo-realism, a mode of fiction which is neither purely organic (realistic) nor non-organic (surrealistic/avant-garde), but which instead situates itself in a grey area which succeeds both historically and combines elements of each formally.

reader awaits the introduction of the abstraction which will interpret the nature of the hair, what it is to represent. Instead of satisfying this readerly desire, Carver leaves the reader in a state of suspension, waiting for the real work of the story, the conflict of the fictional situation, to begin to play itself out. However, even when the story does seem to be starting to progress, "the central conflict is [still] so fully objectified as to be unspeakable" (Stull 468).

In both "The Metamorphosis" and "The Hair," the sense of alienation which both protagonists live is largely defined by their status as units of production in a capitalist economy. Gregor Samsa's most pressing concern, once he has moved into the first stage of acceptance of the nature of the transformation he has undergone, is to protect his position in the company he works for as a commercial traveller. That this position does not represent his highest aspirations as a human being is made clear quite early on in the story, when the narrator allows us to overhear Gregor's thoughts about his job:

This getting up early, he thought, makes one quite stupid. A man needs his sleep. . . . If I didn't have to hold my hand because of my parents I'd have given notice long ago, I'd have gone to the chief and told him exactly what I think of him. . . . Well, there's still hope;<sup>7</sup> once I've saved enough money to pay back my

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<sup>7</sup> This word, and its negation, comprise between them the outside limits of mood in Kafka's fiction, an attribute which it shares with Carver's early fiction. In fact, William L. Stull gives a generic name to the setting of Carver's early

parents' debts to him--that should take another five or six years--I'll do it without fail. I'll cut myself completely loose then. (90)

Gregor Samsa's plight is representative of that which all who function within the framework of a capitalist economy must contend. Certain aspects are exaggerated in this case--the situation regarding his family's debt to his employer makes Gregor's obligation to keep working, in order to both provide for them and to clear their name of the muck of debt, clearer than it might appear otherwise<sup>8</sup>--but the basic circumstances show

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stories which could apply to Kafka's stories as well ("Beyond Hopelessnessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver"). In his essay "Kafka," Walter Benjamin relates a conversation between Kafka and Max Brod on the subject of hope. After asserting that "We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts that come into God's head" and "our world is only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his," Kafka replies to Brod's counter-assertion that "Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know" with a smile and an enigmatic utterance: "Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope--but not for us" (116).

<sup>8</sup> That he has to work to clear up a family name dragged into debt by his father rather than to support a young family is significant, even if Deleuze and Guattari do summarily dismiss all Oedipal interpretation of "The Metamorphosis." The sins of the father, in this case a failure at business, completely determine the range of possibilities available to the son, who, having to devote his life to addressing the past, is robbed of a future. That Carver appreciates Kafka's feelings about the dismalness of work is made explicit in the poem "Kafka's Watch," which Carver adapts from a letter:

I have a job with a tiny salary of 80 crowns, and  
an infinite eight to nine hours of work.

I devour the time outside the office like a wild beast.  
Someday I hope to sit in a chair in another  
country, looking out the window at fields of sugarcane  
or Mohammedan cemeteries.

I don't complain about the work so much as about  
the sluggishness of swampy time. The office hours  
cannot be divided up! I feel the pressure  
of the full eight or nine hours even in the last  
half hour of the day. It's like a train ride  
lasting night and day. In the end you're totally  
crushed. You no longer think about the straining  
of the engine, or about the hills or

certain fundamental truths about existence in a capitalist economy. The needs of the self, for freedom and self-expression, are necessarily subjugated to one's devotion to the family (the basic unit of social organization in early capitalism), which in turn necessitates one's duty to an employer.

However, the obligations do not flow both ways--the equation is one-sided in favor of the employer, whose power determines how things will go. The employer, not bound to loyalty as is the employee, out of fear, is constrained only by the logic of capital, which dictates that he pursue the course which will bring him the best return on his investment, even if that requires him to turn his back on one who has served him well in the past. We can observe a recognition of these hard facts by Gregor Samsa, when after finally opening the door of his room to reveal himself to the chief clerk, who has come to see why he missed the seven o'clock train (and has already suggested, through the door, in front of Gregor's parents, the company's position that "For some past time [his] work has been most unsatisfactory" and that his "position in the company is not unassailable" (97)), Gregor offers to return to work immediately: "I'll put my clothes on at once, pack up my samples, and start off" (101). In return he asks that the chief clerk represent his interests back at the office:

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flat country, but ascribe all that's happening to your watch alone. The watch which you continually hold in the palm of your hand. Then shake. And bring slowly to your ear in disbelief. (*Ultramarine* 69).

Will you give a true account of all this? One can be temporarily incapacitated, but that's just the moment for remembering former services and bearing in mind that later on, when the incapacity has been got over, one will certainly work with all the more industry and concentration. . . . I'm in great difficulties, but I'll get out of them again. Don't make things any worse for me than they are. Stand up for me in the firm. (101)

But the chief clerk's only reply is to quit the house with a suddenness which suggests that "he had burned the sole of his foot" (102). Gregor Samsa's years of devotion to the cause of the company come to nothing in this moment of crisis, when on this one particular morning he is unable to attend to the obligations which form the concrete conditions of his life. His endless deferral of his humanity, the part of himself which can only be defined negatively as the kind of person he would choose to be if he could escape his status as a mere pawn of capital, has been for nothing. Now set free of these restraints because of the awful transformation he has undergone, against his will, he is confused when he is finally subjected to the lack of self-definition which he possesses as a mere functionary within an abstract system of capital, and subsequently all he can be is what he has become--a giant insect, with only the needs and desires of a less than human being.

Just as the nature of the transformation which the protagonist of "The Hair" undergoes is much less radical than that



of Gregor Samsa, so is his relation to the economy which defines his existence drawn much more subtly. The object which he perceives as being stuck between his teeth, and which is always referred to as the hair despite the fact that it is never actually determined to be any *thing* at all, seems to subtly alter every aspect of his existence, starting with his relation to his own body and expanding outward to encompass all of his relations with others. We have already taken note of the protagonist's obsessive desire to see the hair, and having seen it, to try and remove it: with the lack of initial success, the violence of his attempts escalates: "He ground his teeth together, squeezed his lips down against his teeth until his fingernails broke the skin" (43). When his wife comes to have a look: "He stood under the light, mouth open, twisting his head back and forth, wiping his pajama sleeve over the glass as it fogged up." This tiny material incursion into the protagonist's habitual way of feeling, even just the perception, the sensory shadow of a material incursion, is already working against his humanity--he appears before us a ludicrous creature, grimacing and gesticulating, hopping up and down in front of the bathroom mirror.

The perception of this material presence in his mouth disturbs his appetite: "he didn't want any breakfast" (44). This disruption of his regular routine, and the time which is made available to him because of it, allows him to explore possibilities which have been inherent in his life thus far, but never actually developed. The logic of this is made clear in the narrator's

formulation: "He decided to walk downtown since he didn't want any breakfast and still had plenty of time to get to work." The first thing the protagonist comes to understand as a result of the disruption in his routine is the subservient nature of his position at work: "Nobody had a key except the boss and if he got there too early he'd only have to wait." No doubt the protagonist would have had this realization much earlier in his tenure there, but through time he probably would have developed a system whereby he caught the bus that would get him to work just in time, so he wouldn't have to stand around mulling over his dependence on the boss for his economic survival. But today, thrown off his appetite and his routine by the perception of a mysterious material presence that has invaded his body, he is forced to reacknowledge his position, that he is of the class of employees, those who are childlike in that they cannot be trusted with keys, one of those who must wait for their superiors to grant them entry and provide them with direction.

The second realization which the protagonist undergoes also derives from the paradoxical leisure he enjoys on this morning. By walking rather than taking the bus he moves through his neighborhood at a much slower pace and at a lower level--he is in his environment rather than above and through it--and thus he is able to experience it differently than he habitually does far up in the bus, insulated from a sensory appreciation of the environment by layers of glass and steel. He is able to observe the animal life of the street:

He walked by the empty corner where he usually caught the bus. A dog he'd seen around the neighborhood before had his leg cocked, pissing on the bus stop sign.

"Hey!"

The dog quit pissing and came running over to him. Another dog that he didn't recognize came trotting up, sniffed at the sign, and pissed. Golden, slightly steaming as it ran down the sidewalk.

"Hey--get out of here!"

The dog squirted a few more drops then both dogs crossed the street. They almost looked like they were laughing. He threaded the hair back and forth between his teeth. (44)

It is as if the sudden intrusion of materiality into the consciousness of the protagonist causes him to become more aware of all the various manifestations of materiality in his world. The way the narrative lingers over the sensuous aspects of the dog's urination strikes the reader as strange. Is this supposed to be funny? The dogs themselves seem to think so, or at least the narrator indicates through the protagonist's perception of their expressions that they might. The laughing dogs bring to mind some of Kafka's animals, those who "of all of Kafka's creatures . . . have the greatest opportunity for reflection" (Benjamin 132). We might consider the dogs to be laughing with the protagonist, to be joined in laughter with him, if we think that the dogs recognize

him as someone who, for whatever reason, enjoys a dog's opportunity for reflection. In this case the protagonist's perception of a radical sense of materiality has thrown him off his routine and rationale, leaving him free to notice things he would not have the leisure to otherwise, and to reflect upon them as a free-dog. In this way the dogs' laughter must be read as an intuitive recognition on their part of attributes they share with the protagonist, the basis of communal feeling. On the other hand, the dogs' laughter might be read as scornful and malicious. In the Kafka story "Investigations of a Dog," the narrator defines dog society as fundamentally opposed to other societies in that the former is predicated upon a "communal impulse; all our laws and institutions . . . go back to this longing for the greatest bliss we are capable of, the warm comfort of being together" (279).<sup>9</sup> If we take the two dogs in "The Hair" to be representatives of such a society, then we might understand their laughter as a shunning, insults hurled at a creature who has allowed the tiniest deviation from his sense of normality to cut himself off from his feeling of belonging to the community in which he has lived until then without question. The latter interpretation seems a better fit with the tone of the story, for the sound of the dog's laughter is followed by the protagonist's returning his attention to the hair between his teeth, an abrupt transition which does not strike the reader as particularly benign.

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<sup>9</sup>This being together is not to be understood as an abstraction, but as a physical reality--all together in one heap, as it were.

The narrative then undergoes a moment of ellision, in which the rest of the journey to work is skipped over. This produces another abrupt transition, from the protagonist's obsession with the hair to the banality of the social forms which mark the beginning of the working day:

"Nice day now, isn't it, huh?" the boss asked. He opened the front door, raised the shade.

Everyone turned to look back outside and nodded, smiling.

"Yes it is, Sir, just a beautiful day," someone said.

"Too nice to be working," someone else said, laughed with the others.

"Yes it is. It is at that," the boss said. He went on up the stairs to open up Boy's Clothing, whistling, jingling his keys. (44)

The purpose of these social forms is to mask and contain the power relations which exist between boss and workers, and thus to mitigate the resentment of the latter group by creating at least momentarily a situation wherein all are equals. But it must not be forgotten that the workers have all been waiting there for the boss to arrive, and it is he who must initiate the ritual exchange of banalities. The first reply by an employee is a straightforward affirmation of the boss' statement which serves to re-establish his authority, which might be at a low ebb, given that the workers have been their own bosses since they left the workplace the previous evening. The second reply is more complex, and

embodies some of the contradictions inherent in being a worker in a society which professes itself to be both democratic and classless. This reply hides a challenge to the authority of the boss in its humor: it is a wisecrack that contains in it the suggestion of subversion, that the boss is precisely he who would make men work as if this day was no better or different from any other. The capitalist-commercial economy in which these men are employed does not allow for distinctions to be made between days other than the binary opposition of workday/day off. The boss is the one who must sell his men on the necessity of such a system; he must make them understand that this is the only way it can be. He manages the subversion of the second reply by affirming it in such a way that it is actually negated. He literally agrees that "Yes it is" too nice a day to work, but then he proceeds directly to work, cutting off any elaboration of this line of thinking. It is significant that as he goes up the stairs, leading the men away from their stillborn fantasies of freedom, towards their obligations to themselves as units of production in a commercial economy, he jingles his keys, which as we have already seen, function as a kind of emblem of his authority. His keys give him the power to make others wait upon his arrival, to initiate and terminate ritual discourse, and to allow access to the places they must go to earn their livings.

As we have already remarked, the protagonist's perception of the hair in his mouth, and the incursion of a sense of materiality into his consciousness which it serves to represent,

causes him to perceive other phenomena in ways which have not occurred to him before. When he sees the boss come into the staff lounge wearing a short-sleeved shirt, he realizes that "He'd never noticed before that the boss had such hairy arms. He sat picking his teeth, staring at the thick tufts of black hair that grew in between the boss's fingers" (44). The protagonist is hyper-aware of all physical manifestations of being, especially of hair. The reader is not really prepared for what happens next, as the narrative does not explain why the protagonist asks the boss for the rest of the day off. Abrupt transitions indicate the motivelessness which seems to permeate the story. All we have for explanation is the vague feeling of malaise the protagonist has been feeling ever since he awoke this morning:

"Sir, I was wondering--if you don't think I can, that's all right, naturally, but if you think so, without putting anybody in a bind, I mean--I'd like to go home. I don't feel so well."

"Mmm. We can make it all right, of course. That's not the point, of course." He took a long drink of his Coke, kept looking at him.

"Well then, that's all right then, Sir. I'll make it. I was just wondering."

"No, no, that's all right now. You go on home. Call me up tonight, let me know how you are." (44-45)

We cannot be sure whether or not the protagonist has been waiting all morning for an opportunity to approach his boss with

this question, or whether just seeing the boss' hairy arms triggers an association with the perception of a hair in his mouth which suddenly makes the idea of spending the rest of the day confined to his place of work unbearable to him. In either case, the protagonist's method of approach is worth noting for how it elaborates on the themes of power relations in the workplace. The protagonist's approach is marked with evidence of submission; he puts his question in such a way as to suggest that he expects a negative answer. The whole scene calls to mind the image of a dog approaching its master--hoping for a treat but expecting a beating. However, as unseemly as this approach appears in the context of the protagonist's dignity as a human being, it is quite effective in the context of the power-relations of the workplace. This approach allows the boss to feel his power, to tease the questioner with his authority, and finally to appear more generous than he really is. When the boss initially replies "We can make it all right," he asserts his power to speak for the collectivity (the company) and suggests its capacity to withstand the loss of mere individuals. An employee may come or go, but the position which he fills exists whether he is there or not. A new person can always be brought in to take the place of another--people are expendable. When the boss then adds "That's not the point," he asserts that although the company-entity must surely survive the short-term absence of one of its employees, the real question is: "Why should it have to?" Is it not precisely the employee's duty to be there? Isn't this what he is paid to do? Is this asking too much?



The protagonist absorbs both the literal message and the hidden content of the glance which follows it, and, realizing the tenuousness of his position, backs away from the question with more weak, submissive language. The boss is thus given the opportunity to negate the protagonist's negation of his original question. Although the whole procedure appears both perverse and absurd to the outside observer, it is entirely rational within the context of the power relations which exist in the workplace. As a result of such a successful transaction, both parties are able to feel that they have accomplished something: the protagonist has negotiated the rest of the day off and the boss has exerted his authority in such a way that he can feel generous in granting an employee time off for compassionate reasons.

Free of the constraints of his workday reality, the protagonist sets off on a seemingly random journey through town:

Out in the street he loosened his collar and began to walk. He felt strange walking around town with a hair in his mouth. He kept touching it with his tongue. He didn't look at any of the people he met. In a little while he began to sweat under his arms and could feel it dripping through the hair into his undershirt. Sometimes he stopped in front of the showroom windows and stared at the glass, opening and closing his mouth, fishing around with his finger. He took the long way home, down through the Lions Club Park where he watched the kids play in the wading pool

and paid fifteen cents to an old lady to go through the little zoo and see the birds and animals. Once after he had stood for a long time looking through the glass at the giant Gila monster, the creature opened one of its eyes and looked at him. He backed away from the glass and went on walking around the park until it was time to go home.

He wasn't very hungry and only drank some coffee for supper. After a few swallows he rolled his tongue over the hair again. He got up from the table.

(45)

Leaving the workplace does not help him shake the feeling of alienation which has been dogging him ever since he woke up with the perception of the hair in his mouth. In his wanderings through town we again notice a kind of neurotic hyper-awareness of the materiality of his being, most evident in the way he is always stopping to examine himself, looking for outward manifestations, physical evidence of the transformation which he feels he has undergone. The image of the protagonist standing in front of the showroom window, opening and closing his mouth, suggests a large, grotesque fish. Imagine what someone on the other side of this window might think--surely that this was a creature who was somewhat less than fully human, a mental defective or even worse. And then there is the protagonist's reaction to the gaze of the Gila monster--he backs away. But what does this mean? Does it have to *mean* anything? It might suggest

that the protagonist's radical awareness of his materiality, forced upon him by the perception of the thing in his mouth, causes him to recognize the nature of the qualities which he holds in common with all of the animals which figure so prominently in the story. However, the protagonist appears unable to identify himself completely with either animals or human beings: the exaggerated sense of materiality drives him to try to seek out something of himself in non-human creatures, and yet the neurotic anxiety which is an attribute of higher, human consciousness does not allow him to fulfill basic animal functions, such as eating.

Unable to eat anything, the protagonist decides to try to take refuge in sleep. His wife wants to call for a doctor, but he insists that he will be all right: "It felt better just to stretch out. He touched his face and thought he might have a fever. He licked his lips and touched the end of the hair with his tongue. He shivered" (46). The narrative does not inform us whether the fever is a hypothesis which the protagonist is constructing in order to explain the way he has been feeling to himself. We are all familiar with the phenomenon whereby when we are run down and on the verge of succumbing to illness our bodies feel somewhat strange to us, different than they do normally.<sup>10</sup> Or is it just that now, having lain down, the protagonist feels feverish? We are not provided enough information to say with certainty that the fever should be seen in either of these two ways. After dozing off for a

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<sup>10</sup> "Kafka called the cough that erupted from within him 'the animal'" (Benjamin 132).

while, the protagonist gets up to phone his boss to tell him that he will be coming in to work tomorrow. Apparently, the protagonist has reached a point where he is willing to try to reconcile himself to the sense of transformation he has undergone:

After he got back in bed he smoothed his tongue over his teeth again. Maybe it was just something he could get used to. He didn't know. Just before he went to sleep, he'd almost stopped thinking about it. He remembered what a warm day it had been and those kids out wading--how the birds were singing that morning. But once during the night he yelled out and woke up sweating, almost choking. No, No, he kept saying, kicking his feet against the covers. It scared his wife and she didn't know what was the matter. (46)

In the process of trying to fall asleep the protagonist is almost able to forget about the hair, which would seem to indicate that it is his perception of, or concentration on the hair which is the root of the problem here. The hair might only be a construct which provides the occasion for the obsessive activity of perception/concentration, which contributes to his feeling of alienation, which then reinforces the feeling of differentness that he interprets as a heightened sense of his existence as a material phenomenon. In effect, his consciousness is trapped in a kind of neurotic feedback loop, and in approaching the oblivion that is sleep he is *almost* able to break free of it by concentrating on those things which he saw on this day which might serve to confirm his ideas about the

world he lived in before he started to feel this thing in his mouth. However, as Benjamin notes with regard to Kafka's stories, "Oblivion is the container from which the inexhaustible intermediate world . . . presses toward the light" (131). In oblivion symbolic phenomena must be transformed into concrete and particular things.<sup>11</sup> Thus, as the protagonist moves from the stage of twilight consciousness, in which he is able to willfully blot out perception of the hair, into the sub-conscious oblivion of deep sleep, he relinquishes all control over himself. But it is not made clear that it is the hair which inspires this final outburst.

The kinds of ambiguity inherent in the minimalist fiction which Carver practises in "The Hair" are its strength. Unlike the kinds of realism which Lukacs characterizes as organic, the historical tradition of bourgeois fiction, Carver's minimalist fiction does not attempt to drive the reader's understanding of the story to seemingly inescapable conclusions through a forceful and authoritative narrative structure. "The Hair," like most of Kafka's fiction, seems to call for symbolic interpretation, and yet it does not provide a context sufficient for any particular reading based on a coherent system of symbols. Carver's minimalist, neo-realist fiction appears on the one hand to be organic in that it "intends the impression of wholeness" (Buerger 72), and yet it also seems to function as a fragment in itself, which as an "unclosed,

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<sup>11</sup> These concrete and particular things are akin to the "isolated reality fragments" of allegory which Benjamin proposes are the opposite of the organic symbol (Buerger 69). According to this perspective, meaning is posited by the juxtaposition of fragments, "it does not derive from the original context of the fragments."

individual segment of art opens [itself] to supplementary responses . . . challenges its recipient to make it an integrated part of his or her reality and to relate it to sensuous-material existence" (Schulte-Sasse xxxix). "The Hair" at first glance appears to be a carefully made story in the realist tradition, leading the reader to expect a hermeneutic relationship between the parts of the story and the story as a whole to be in effect, a relationship whereby "an anticipating comprehension of the whole guides, and is simultaneously corrected by, the comprehension of the parts" (Buerger 79-80). But in the case of "The Hair," when the reader attempts to reconcile the various parts of the story--the perception of the hair, the protagonist's relationship with his wife, the animal imagery, the socio-economic subtext--with an impression of the story as a whole, the hermeneutic circle fails. The parts of the story and the story as a whole do not coalesce to form a dialectical unity; instead the story seems to be composed according to an avant-garde principle, "the negation of synthesis" (79). Such a work

neither creates a total impression that would permit an interpretation of its meaning nor can whatever impression may be created be accounted for by recourse to the individual parts, for they are no longer subordinated to a pervasive intent. This refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient. (Buerger 80)

The shock-like experience of the reader confronted with a text like "The Hair" is a result of the disjunction between "the mode of reception developed through dealing with organic works of art and the effort to grasp the principles of construction" (Buerger 81), and this disjunction calls for the renunciation of the interpretation of the work's ultimate meaning. Now obviously my reading of "The Hair" does attempt to interpret the story to some degree, for although this story does gesture towards avant-garde technique it is still firmly rooted in the realist tradition of organic, symbolic fiction. Even in the purest of avant-garde works, "the emancipation of the individual elements never reaches total detachment from the whole of the work" (82). Thus the reading that makes the most sense for a story such as "The Hair" does not require a complete renunciation of meaning, but of ultimate meaning, of the attempt to construct a "best" reading which would nail the text down once and for all to a single, universally valid interpretation. Instead of exploring "the harmony of the individual parts that constitute the whole," the reader turns to explore "the contradictory relationship of heterogenous elements" (82). It is interesting to note that the story ends on a note of shock and incomprehension--the protagonist's wife is having as hard a time as the reader in trying to figure out what is happening.

A second Carver story which involves an element of bodily transformation is "Careful," from the third major-press collection, *Cathedral*. William L. Stull calls it "the clearest descendant"

("Raymond Carver Remembered" 468) of "The Hair." In "Careful," as in "The Hair" and "The Metamorphosis," this physical transformation of the main character occurs during the night, while he is sleeping:

He'd awakened that morning and found that his ear had stopped up with wax. He couldn't hear anything clearly, and he seemed to have lost his sense of balance, his equilibrium, in the process. For the last hour, he'd been on the sofa, working frustratedly on his ear, now and again slamming his ear with his fist. Once in a while he'd massage the gristly underpart of his ear, or else tug at his lobe. Then he'd dig furiously in his ear with his little finger and open his mouth, simulating yawns. But he'd tried everything he could think of, and he was nearing the end of his rope.

(113-14)

Unlike "The Hair," one might argue that "Careful" is not a minimalist story at all, for even if the story does shy away from any ultimate sense of narrative closure it is still much too expansive and informative to fit the kind of definition we have been working with thus far. Although "Careful" really begins with the passage just quoted, it is preceded by almost three full pages of exposition, in which the narrative provides a definite human context for our understanding of Lloyd, the protagonist, and Inez, his wife, and the situation which they have created for themselves. Just the fact that the characters in "Careful" are given



names is significant--it is much more likely for a reader to empathize with a Lloyd or an Inez than with a "he" or "his wife."

Lloyd's situation is similar in some respects to that of the protagonist of "The Hair" and different in others. The fundamental zone of intersection of the two stories concerns the nature of the transformation which both men have undergone. In both cases this transformation is the result of their perception of a physical incursion into their habitual mode of receiving the world, but while in "The Hair" the actual existence of the material object itself is never established beyond a reasonable doubt (which raises questions about perception itself), in "Careful" the material object is shown to exist because the condition which it causes is treated (even if the larger condition, Lloyd's alcoholism, which the blockage represents symbolically, is not). In both cases the nature of the transformation which the main characters undergo appears trifling put beside Gregor Samsa's in "The Metamorphosis," and yet these apparently trivial changes have ramifications far beyond their obvious physical impact. In both "Careful" and "The Hair," the perception of the materiality which both protagonists experience causes them to become frantic and animal-like in their single-minded need to rid themselves of the thing which is driving them to distraction and dissociation.<sup>12</sup> There is a certain dark comedy inherent in the image of a man sitting on a couch,

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<sup>12</sup> The latter term is integral to the kind of reading of Carver's stories which Boxer and Phillips conduct, where they focus on the psychological aspects of alienation as dissociation from the self.

beating himself on the head with his own fist.<sup>13</sup> We see in this image a refutation of the common human assumption that the mind, through the agency of the will, can overcome any and all demands that the body imposes on it.<sup>14</sup> The dispossession of the will by the body's instinctual need to purge itself of intrusions into its normal operating conditions is illustrated by the furious digging into the cavity of his ear which Lloyd does with his little finger. Combined with his simulated yawns, which recall the grimacing that the protagonist of "The Hair" does before various mirrors and windows, the narrative does not draw a pretty picture of the nature of Lloyd's transformation.<sup>15</sup>

An important distinction between the two stories, and the plight of their protagonists, concerns the pre-transformation state. In "Careful," the narrative states that the blockage in Lloyd's ear frustrates his equilibrium. While physically this statement might hold true (our sense of balance is governed by the operation of the middle ear), if we take the concept of equilibrium figuratively we must surely think that Lloyd has been suffering from a lack of balance and harmony in his life for a long time. While one might

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<sup>13</sup> See Kafka's minimalist masterpiece, "Bachelor's Ill Luck" (394-95).

<sup>14</sup> This assumption can take many forms, from the most banal (ignore an itch and it will go away) to the most tragic (cancer can be beaten with a positive attitude--so if you die of cancer it is because you did not have the strength of will to beat it).

<sup>15</sup> In the title-story from the collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, there is a character who undergoes a twofold, physical transformation into an animal-like creature as a result of his being spurned by his wife. In the first instance he drinks rat poison and his gums pull "away from his teeth" (139). The second time he bungles shooting himself in the mouth and his head swells "up to twice the size of a normal head" (142) before he finally dies.

argue that the protagonist of "The Hair" also suffers from a lack of harmony in his life (as exemplified by his superficial relations with others, including his wife and children, as well as the strong Marxist sense of his utter alienation from himself as a unit of production, etc.), this lack has to be read into the story after the fact to try to explain it. It is just as plausible to consider that, within the narrow parameters which this man has set for himself in his life (or which have been set for him by the economic superstructure), the protagonist of "The Hair" enjoys a certain diminished kind of harmony--everything seems to be going smoothly, even if not as satisfyingly on the deepest of levels as he might like if he knew it was even possible, until he wakes up one morning with the feeling of a hair in his mouth. It is the incursion of a sense of radical materiality into the everyday, programmed consciousness of the protagonist in "The Hair" which jolts him into a realization of the lack of harmony which has existed in his life until then.

On the other hand, in Lloyd's case we are looking at a life which in a much more straightforward way is in shambles long before the blockage appears in his ear. He has had to move out of the house which he shared with his wife ("After a lot of talking--what his wife, Inez, called *assessment*" (111)), and into a tiny, two-room attic apartment. He is living alone so that he can try "to do something about his drinking" (113),<sup>16</sup> but the method which

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<sup>16</sup> In "Glimpses: Raymond Carver", Douglas Unger says how the apartment in "Careful" describes "exactly" a small apartment Carver rented on Castro Street in San Francisco for one of his attempts to wean himself off the booze: "He had

he is trying is so absurd as to call into question his commitment to such a project. His fridge contains nothing "except fruit juice, lunch meat, and champagne. . . . One morning he woke up and promptly fell to eating crumb doughnuts and drinking champagne" (112). These are not the actions of a man who has an equilibrium to lose. It is only delusion on Lloyd's part which allows him to think that it was the blockage which caused his loss of balance.

Beyond the relative expansiveness of the narrative in "Careful," largely the result of exposition, there are deeper reasons for arguing that this is not a minimalist fiction in the same way as "The Hair." Where the physical object which is supposed to cause the transformation in "The Hair" may not even exist, and even if it does might still only be considered an allegorical fragment at best, the blockage in "Careful" is inscribed in the story in such a way that it operates like a traditional, organic symbol. William L. Stull states that "the alcoholic protagonist's wax-stopped ear becomes the emblem of a host of 'blockages,' including his refusal to hear the truth about his drinking" ("Raymond Carver Remembered" 469). Many of the symbolic systems of correspondence which readers are trained to expect in a well-made realist story are present in "Careful." We have already noted that the loss of physical equilibrium caused by the blockage is a synecdoche for the larger, more general loss of balance in Lloyd's life. When Lloyd shakes his head it feels "full and like it was awash with fluid"

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somehow convinced himself that if he only drank champagne, he'd be able to taper off and quit" (Halpert 277).

(115), a sensation appropriate to one who is drowning himself in cheap champagne. The kind of reading of the story which Peter J. Donahue does in his essay "Alcoholism as Ideology" would not be nearly as convincing without the tight system of symbolic correspondences which Carver installed in "Careful." Donahue reads the blockage as just one more manifestation of the self-limiting which the alcoholic imposes on himself in service of his disease: "The disease speaks with the univocal voice of need, which for a ruling ideology is just another--albeit primary--discursive act which restricts its subject and preserves misrecognition of itself" (59). The ideology of alcoholism "represses all other signifiers and blocks access to differentiation between them" (55). Donahue points out how the sense of enclosure inherent in Lloyd's tiny apartment (the "limited perspectives" (59) it allows), his lack of a telephone, and his inability to conduct a dialogue with his wife (by the time she helps him to get his ear unplugged she has to leave), all contribute to the story's symbolic representation of alcoholism as a repressive ideology which does not allow for true communication between human beings.

In this way the individual parts and the whole of "Careful" form a dialectical unity--there is "a necessary congruence between the meaning of the individual parts and the meaning of the whole" (Buerger 80). The organic construction of the story dictates that the ending will have a certain sense of closure which was noticeably absent from "The Hair." In "Careful," Lloyd worries

at the end that if he falls asleep his ear might plug up again. He decides, "It was just something he'd have to learn to live with" (125). When the protagonist of "The Hair" thinks that his problem is something he might get used to, the assertion is constructed in such a way that its meaning is ambiguous, a direct result of the minimalist techniques used in the development of the story. Lloyd's statement of acquiescence, however similar to that made by the protagonist of "The Hair" on the surface, is intended very differently, as an understanding of its fictional context makes clear. Lloyd has already learned to live with such a severely limited vision of the world under the influence of the repressive ideology of alcoholism that we instinctively recognize that he has already accepted virtually anything that can happen in this world before it actually happens. He can only listen to his disease, whether his ear is blocked or not.

Both "The Hair" and "Careful" concern the effects that the perception of one's own body might have on one's feelings about oneself. But Carver also shows an interest in the effects that the apprehension of other bodies by the self might have on this first self. The whole mass of signification surrounding issues of body size and shape in contemporary culture is indicative of a collective delusion concerning body size--that this is just one more way in which the individual is expected to exert conscious control over physical processes. In the story "Fat," from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, a character is introduced who is physically opposite Kafka's Hunger Artist, but who nevertheless shares with him a

sense of determination rooted in the body, an acceptance of who he is based upon a recognition of the degree to which consciousness and the identity it constructs for itself are determined by physical being. In "A Hunger Artist," the protagonist is compelled to continue his fasting long after this activity has ceased to bring him any external impetus to go on. Fasting has fallen out of fashion, the public has lost interest in the spectacle of a man consciously and methodically reducing himself to his barest essence; there is little fame or wealth left to be won by the practitioner of this most exacting art. And yet the Hunger Artist continues to pursue his vocation with the highest degree of integrity, even if "the world was cheating him of his reward" (276). The Hunger Artist's final conversation with the overseer reveals his motivation in continuing right up until the point of death:

"I always wanted you to admire my fasting," said the hunger artist. "We do admire it," said the overseer, affably. "But you shouldn't admire it," said the hunger artist. "Well then we don't admire it," said the overseer, "but why shouldn't we admire it?" "Because I have to fast, I can't help it," said the hunger artist. . . . Because . . . I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else." (277)

What others have interpreted as the Hunger Artist's conscious application of the will in order to suppress and over-ride an

appetite which is assumed to be universal (an assumption rooted in the failure of the imagination, to even consider that someone might feel differently about something so basic to existence as food itself), I would argue that the Hunger Artist reveals a surrendering of the will to the demands of the particularity of his body, which is determined to doom itself to extinction in order to remain true to its preternatural pickiness.

In sharp contrast to the Hunger Artist, the man who is the focus of the protagonist's attention in "Fat" has an entirely opposite orientation to food--there appears to be no food that he does not like. Joanne (the protagonist/first-person narrator) first describes this man to her friend Rita as "the fattest person I have ever seen, though he is neat-appearing and well-dressed enough" (1). Already we can observe one set of cultural assumptions under attack here--that weight is a moral issue, that the overweight are that way because they are slobs, that their lack of discipline and self-regulation regarding caloric intake is reflected in poor personal grooming and a lack of attention to the niceties of physical presentation. After this man eats a very large meal--Caesar salad, soup, lamb chops, baked potato drenched in sour cream and three baskets of bread and butter--he is ready for dessert. But "the Green Lantern Special, which is a pudding cake with sauce" (4), is not enough for him: he wants to have "a dish of vanilla ice cream as well. With just a drop of chocolate syrup, if you please." When Rudy, Joanne's husband and the cook at the restaurant where this gluttony takes place, hears this, he tells her



that Harriet, the other waitress, has referred to the customer as "a fat man from the circus" (5). The exchange which occurs between Joanne and the fat man when she serves him his dessert exemplifies the connection between the fat man and the Hunger Artist:

Believe it or not, he says, we have not always eaten like this.

Me, I eat and I eat and I can't gain, I say. I'd like to gain, I say.

No, he says. If we had our choice, no. But there is no choice. (5)

Joanne, like the overseer in "A Hunger Artist," shares the outlook of the vast majority of humanity, or at least that portion of it which constitutes advanced, western society, who have lost the ability to feel at home in their bodies and, as a consequence, to understand what their bodies want from them. It is assumed that all bodies are the same and that the individual should strive to reduce the difference between the appearance of his or her body and those of others. Joanne expresses to the fat man a desire to put on weight,<sup>17</sup> to force her body to better approximate what she perceives to be her society's image-ideal of the preferred womanly body shape. Joanne sees in the fat man's appetite a negative expression of will, a desire to attain a kind of power

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<sup>17</sup> A desire rarely enunciated among women today. Joanne, however, lived in a time and place where the voluptuousness of the female type represented by figures such as Marilyn Monroe dominated the cultural imagination of America, and thus this is how she thinks she would like to look.

which comes with sheer physical presence, and she feels herself sorely in need of such a sense of power in her life. The fat man is someone she comes to admire as someone who is willing to remake himself in accordance with desires which radiate from deep within the self, rather than to submit to the manufactured desires imposed by mass culture. She intuitively understands his use of the plural, first-person pronoun to refer to himself as a strategy for overcoming the limitations of the self which contemporary society enforces.<sup>18</sup> And yet these very limitations, mainly linguistic in this instance, keep her from explicitly understanding what she seems to be able to understand intuitively. What the critic David Kaufmann refers to as the paratactic strategy of Carver's minimalist fiction, the use of sentence structure and organization to simulate "working-class speech" (98) by the avoidance of grammatical subordination and any logical connection other than sequential chronology, keeps Joanne from conceptualizing or articulating her situation. She

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<sup>18</sup> Ewing Campbell, in his book *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction*, also sees "Fat" as "shaped by Kafka's earlier narrative, antithetically. [Carver] complicates and enriches his story by providing what is missing in Kafka's story: someone who intuits and identifies with the artistic compulsion" (14). In an interview with David Applefield conducted in 1987, in which Carver discusses the origins of "Fat," he makes clear that such an identification on the part of the narrator is strictly intuitive. Carver explains how his wife "came home from [her job as a waitress] one night and said, 'I waited on this strange character tonight who spoke of himself in the plural. . . .' And I thought how unusual it was that a man would speak of himself in that way. But I didn't do anything with the story for years and then it came time to write the story and it was a question of how best to tell it, whose story it was. Then I made a conscious decision how to present the story, and I decided to tell it from the point of view of the woman, the waitress, and frame the story as if she were telling it to her girlfriend. She can't quite make sense out of the story herself, all of the feelings that she experienced, but she goes ahead and tells it anyway" (210-11).

appears incapable of clearly communicating, even to herself, the nature of her yearning for personal power which she projects onto the figure of the fat man. As she puts it: "I know now I was after something. But I don't know what" (4).

Joanne's meeting with the fat man seems to have initiated a crisis in her life, but she is unable to make clear to herself just what this crisis might be. Certainly she is "disillusioned with her job and her marriage" (Nesset 298), but it is obvious from reading the story that these conditions have been prevailing for a long time. As Kirk Nesset points out, the fat man has a lot of positive attributes which her husband lacks--he is "Polite,<sup>19</sup> articulate, and 'well-dressed,' [. . .] the token of a kind of opulence . . . which, by comparison, makes the waitress' own dull life seem mean and shabby" (298)--and yet these attributes seem too superficial to provide us with much insight into what exactly she feels she lacks. Although the precise nature of the "something" she is after--the "it" which is the change which she feels her life is going to undergo (6) remains undefined at the end of the story--she does seem to have learned something from the fat man, gained insight into her heretofore undiscovered capacity for acknowledgement of the degree to which her life has been determined by forces other than her will. As Nesset reads the end of the story, Joanne's submission to Rudy's unwanted sexual advances later that night ("I turn on my back and relax some, though it is against my will"), and her method of dealing with it by diminishing him "at the very

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<sup>19</sup> Kaufmann calls the obese diner's good manners "grotesque" (98).

locus of violation: the flesh" (Nesset 300),<sup>20</sup> are a way of "identifying with the fat man and his determined world even as she seeks refuge from that world--at once accepting and struggling against determinism, against the complacency which imprisons."<sup>21</sup>

Another story from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* also addresses the social and psychological issues which arise from a consideration of body shape and image. In "They're Not Your Husband," the protagonist, Earl Ober, like so many characters in Carver's early fiction, is "between jobs" (20). In order to make ends meet, his wife, Doreen, "had gone to work nights as a waitress at a twenty-four hour coffee shop at the edge of town." The conflict in the story originates in an impulse on the part of Earl: "One night, when he was drinking, Earl decided to stop by the coffee shop and have something to eat. He wanted to see where Doreen worked, and he wanted to see if he could order something on the house." Earl is at loose ends, having lost his job, the thing which is taken to be the foundation of a man's identity in his society. Given all this time, which he does not really know how to handle, he turns to alcohol to dull his perception of his situation, to help him keep from thinking about his lack of social and

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<sup>20</sup> Joanne imagines she is "terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (6).

<sup>21</sup> In "The Ducks," the male protagonist eats when he is not hungry. Whereas the fat man in "Fat" is perpetually hungry and eats to fulfill himself, the protagonist of "The Ducks" has no appetite at all upon returning from work early because the "mill boss had a heart attack" (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 177). The act of over-eating in this instance represents an attempt on the part of the protagonist to distract himself from the fact of his mortality, the extent to which his existence is determined by his physical being.

economic function--his superfluosness in a capitalist economy. Unable to exert any control over this situation, he goes to the coffee shop to see if he can meddle in the situation his wife has had to accept as a result of his joblessness.

While waiting for the sandwich he has ordered, Earl overhears some remarks that jolt him out of his sense of "suspended animation" (76), which Boxer and Phillips say characterizes the Carver constituency:

Two men in business suits, their ties undone, their collars open, sat down next to him and asked for coffee. As Doreen walked away with the coffee pot, one of the men said to the other, "Look at the ass on that. I don't believe it."

The other man laughed. "I've seen better," he said.

"That's what I mean," the first man said. "But some jokers like their quim fat." (20)

Earl is devastated by what these men, working men who wear suits and have the authoritative confidence with which that very fact invests them, have to say about his wife. In his weakness, he is unable to resist the authority of their gaze, and is instead transformed into a voyeur, seeing his wife through the eyes of these others:

She came back with the pot and poured coffee for him and for the two men. Then she picked up a dish and turned to get some ice cream. She reached down into

the container and with the dipper began to scoop up the ice cream. The white skirt yanked against her hips and crawled up her legs. What showed was girdle, and it was pink, thighs that were rumped and gray and a little hairy, and veins that spread in a beserk display.

The two men sitting beside Earl exchanged looks. One of them raised his eyebrows. The other man grinned and kept looking at Doreen over his cup as she spooned chocolate syrup over the ice cream. When she began shaking the can of whipped cream, Earl got up, leaving his food, and headed for the door. He heard her call his name, but he kept going. (21)

The way he sees his wife here, through the cold eyes of the two businessmen, reduces her to an object of pity, or at best of a perverse lust for the sordid, a sort of Conradian fascination of the abomination. In turning Doreen into a commodity of sorts, the men focus their attention on her as a collection of parts rather than as a whole and complete person. The objectifying gaze of the two men turn her in front of our eyes from a human being with a unique history and physical presence into something grotesque and monstrous.

Earl reacts to this re-visioning of his wife with a sense of shock, and a desire to reject the objectifying gaze which has been imposed on him. But when he later tries to think about what has happened he finds it all to be incomprehensible. When he gets home he checks on the children and goes to bed:

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. He opened his eyes and rolled his head back and forth on the pillow.

Then he turned on his side and fell asleep. (21)

We are told that Earl thinks with an intensity that uses his whole body, but we are not given any insight into the content of his thinking. The paratactic prose of the narrative "is a stylistic correlative of a thematics of incomprehensibility and loss . . . [and] a defense against that loss" (Kaufmann 100). The sense of vulnerability which Earl feels for himself, and that which he felt in seeing his wife as an object in the eyes of others, is exposed to us but not revealed in terms of its essence. Kaufmann argues convincingly in his essay "Yuppie Postmodernism" that the paratactic strategy used in the narrator's treatment of Earl's thought processes

can be seen as the stylistic equivalent of the defense Freud calls "isolation," the process which allows "the insertion of a hiatus into the temporal sequence of thoughts or acts"<sup>22</sup> and deprives potentially threatening material of its affect. . . . In the world of Carver's characters, parataxis serves as the defense against an everyday world which has devolved into an

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<sup>22</sup> J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, 1973. 232.

enigma or has been deformed by the reaction to shock.  
(100)

Earl reacts to the situation with psychic displacement. It never occurs to him that the problem is his, that his inability to resist the authoritative, objectifying gaze of the two businessmen in any way reflects upon himself. He never considers that he should, after all, still be able to see his wife as a whole person, the mother of his children and his companion for many years, rather than as a woman with a fat bum and varicose veins. Rather than addressing his own deeply-buried feelings of insecurity, the direct result of his joblessness, Earl sets out to try and regain a sense of control in his life by exerting control over his wife.

The next morning Earl makes Doreen look at herself in the mirror and suggests to her that she needs to go on a diet. To his credit, he is not absolutely brutal in making this suggestion: "He tried to pick his words" (22) so as not to upset her any more than was necessary to initiate the program. Doreen's vulnerability to Earl's approach is revealed in the image of her standing with her back turned towards the mirror, looking over her shoulder at herself: "She raised one buttock in her hand and let it drop." This image is both grotesque in its suggestion of the size and flabbiness of this isolated buttock, and yet quite heart-rending in its pathos.

Earl uses his expertise as a salesman, "a closer" (23), to sell his wife on the necessity of a diet which becomes at least as much his project as hers. In effect, Earl takes control of Doreen's body,



treating it as a commodity over which he has dominion, and whose market value it is in his interest to increase:

He figured up the balance in their checking account, then drove to the discount store and bought a bathroom scale. He looked the clerk over as she rang up the sale.

At home he had Doreen take off all her clothes and get on the scale. He frowned when he saw the veins. He ran his finger the length of one that sprouted up her thigh. (23)

The purchase of the scale is the necessary investment in order to maximize profits--you have to spend money to make money, so to speak. Earl orders his wife around like a domestic animal. It appears that now he is wholly incapable of seeing her without the mediation of the objectifying gaze he experienced at the coffee shop, and he knows that a diet is not going to do anything for those veins.

The diet-project gives Earl's life more structure than it had otherwise. The diet and his obsession with his wife's physical appearance help to keep him from brooding over his own employment problems:

He read the classifieds. He went to the state employment office. Every three or four days he drove someplace for an interview, and at night he counted her tips. He smoothed out the dollar bills on the table

and stacked the nickels, dimes, and quarters in piles of one dollar. Each morning he put her on the scale. (24)

Nothing comes of the job search, but after a slow start the diet begins to get results--people at work start to notice (although their reaction is mostly negative) and her clothes start to become "loose on her" (25). Earl begins to devote much more of his time to the successful diet than to the futile job search. The diet has negative effects--Doreen feels like she has less energy and as a result has to spend "more time in bed. . . . Earl helped around the house, watched television, and let her sleep. He did all the shopping, and once in a while he went on an interview." But Earl is so encouraged by what he sees as the apparent success of the diet-project, which is achieving its goal through *his* mastery, that he is unable to recognize any of its negative side-effects:

Each morning he followed her into the bathroom and waited while she stepped onto the scale. He got down on his knees with a pencil and the piece of paper. The paper was covered with dates, days of the week, numbers. He read the number on the scale, consulted the paper, and either nodded his head or pursed his lips. (25)

He feels such empowerment in his ability to make something happen here, which serves as compensation for the sense of powerlessness he feels with regard to his joblessness--that he cannot make anyone return his calls or offer him a position. The methodical nature of his record-keeping allows him to feel that he

is doing something important, almost scientific. It is as if he is conducting an elaborate experiment, with his wife as the object of inquiry.

Eventually Earl decides it is time to collect on his investment, hoping to profit psychically from an observation of others' responses to the changes he has imposed on his wife's body. He returns to the coffee shop after putting the children to bed. He first tries to get the waitress who serves him to comment on any changes she has noticed in his wife's appearance, but she does not know who he is or what he is talking about. Instead he has to content himself with adopting the position of a passive voyeur for awhile: "Earl watched his wife and listened carefully. Twice he had to leave his place to go to the bathroom. Each time he wondered if he might have missed hearing something" (26). Dissatisfied with the results of passive approach, he moves to "a stool at the end of the counter next to an older man in a striped shirt." Earl becomes impatient, waiting "for the man to say something" (27) about Doreen. Soon his feelings of exasperation turn into aggression, and he starts firing questions at the man: "What do you think of that?" "Don't you think that's something special?" "Does it look good or not? Tell me." The way Earl refers to his wife with impersonal pronouns indicates the degree to which Earl's dehumanization of his wife has become a fact to him. This mode of reference contains an implied belief that her value as an object reflects upon himself as her owner and creator. Earl desperately seeks to have his life affirmed in some way, and since

no one wants him as an employee his only hope is to experience desire vicariously through his wife. But the older man, unaware of the complex situation he finds himself in, just thinks that Earl is a nut and wants none of his madness:

When Doreen started down the counter again, Earl nudged the man's shoulder and said, "I'm telling you something. Listen. Look at the ass on her. Now you watch this now. Could I have a chocolate sundae?" Earl called to Doreen.

She stopped in front of him and let out her breath. Then she turned and picked up a dish and the ice-cream dipper. She leaned over the freezer, reached down, and began to press the dipper into the ice-cream. Earl looked at the man and winked as Doreen's skirt travelled up her thighs. But the man's eyes caught the eyes of the other waitress. And then the man put the newspaper under his arm and reached into his pocket. (27)

The degradation which Earl imposes upon Doreen in this futile attempt to affirm his worth causes the reader to share the older man's sense of embarrassment. In attempting to negotiate with the world a higher exchange value for himself through his wife Earl has violated the first rule of Kantian ethics--that people are to be treated as ends in themselves rather than as the means to an end. But all Earl's striving for some semblance of reflected glory comes to nothing at the conclusion of the story--it all blows

up in his face. Instead of deriving a psychic benefit from the observation of others' appreciation of the changes which he has wrought upon his wife's body, he finds himself singled out for derision by the other waitress, who, unaware of the relationship between Earl and Doreen, naturally assumes the worst of what she has seen take place between Earl and the older man:

"Who is this joker, anyway?"

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

But the other waitress just studied him, and Doreen just began to shake her head slowly. The man had put some change beside his cup and stood up, but he too waited to hear the answer. They all stared at Earl. (28)

Doreen has to admit that the joker is her husband. Earl's project, which has kept him going these past few weeks, turns out to have had precisely the opposite result to that which he intended-- instead of allowing him to derive a sense of accomplishment through voyeuristically enjoying the objectifying gaze of others focused upon his newly reconfigured wife, he instead becomes the object of derision himself. Lacking the inner strength of character to deny the gaze of the two businessmen in the first instance, to resist their coarseness, to stand up to their authority and proclaim

his wife's right to be who she is, he instead follows a path which leads to his moment of psychic annihilation.<sup>23</sup>

In constructing stories of the dispossessed who are living on the fringes of late capitalist society, we can see Carver engaged in the creation of what Deleuze and Guattari call a minor literature, one which "begins by expressing itself and doesn't conceptualize until afterward" (28). What Kaufmann sees as minimalism's paratactic strategy is akin to what Deleuze and Guattari call the anti-lyrical strategy in Kafka, where the influences of the aestheticism of the time are effaced to achieve "a sobriety, a hyper-realism, a machinism that no longer makes use of them. This is why subjective impressions are systematically replaced by points of connection that function objectively as so many signals in a segmentation, so many special or singular points in a constitution of series" (70). By refusing to conceptualize about itself, minimalist narrative attempts to negate the synthesis which is traditionally expected of organic, realist fiction. It attempts to renounce the interpretation of its meaning, to avoid the semblance of reconciliation with the expectations of its audience. Instead

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<sup>23</sup> A wife's body shape plays a role in at least two more of Carver's stories. In "Sacks," from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* ("The Fling," an earlier version of the story, appears in *Furious Seasons*), the son remembers how he forgot the bag of candy his estranged father has bought for his daughter-in-law and his grandchildren. At the very end of the story, the son thinks that this is "Just as well. Mary didn't need candy, Almond Roca or anything else. That was last year. She needs it now even less" (45). Similarly, at the end of "Feathers," from *Cathedral*, the narrator mentions his wife's weight in his summary of all the things which have gone wrong in their life together since the events of the story took place: "She's gotten fat on me, too. We don't talk about it. What's to say?" (26)

minimalist narrative first presents its reader with a shock, and then lets all talk of meaning proceed from there.<sup>24</sup>

"Collectors" is another story from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* which centers on a socially marginal character. In "Collectors" we find ourselves in the world of weak specification which marks Carver's most minimalistic stories. The unnamed protagonist, the "I" of the first-person narration (whether or not he is the Mr. Slater that the letter is addressed to is one of the story's great mysteries--one that makes all interpretation provisional at best), is "out of work" (100). He is waiting "to hear from up north," presumably about a job: "I lay on the sofa and listened to the rain. Now and then I'd lift up and look through the curtain for the mailman." Boxer and Phillips suggest that this image evokes "a kind of lonely voyeurism" (86), although I read into the situation more of a combination of frustrated expectancy and paranoia. The cogency of my reading is apparent in the

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<sup>24</sup> The concept of shock as an aesthetic response has its problems, foremost among them that, as with anything else in a capitalist society, eventually an audience might learn to consume it effortlessly. Buerger argues that despite the potential for consumption of shock, "the enigmatic quality of the forms, their resistance to the attempt to wrest meaning from them" (81) remains. Kaufmann, building on Buerger's belief that "the shock techniques of the avantgarde were meant--in their utopian formulation--to tear through aesthetic immanence and destroy the borders that separate art and life" (105), asserts that by the time minimalist fiction became the so-called central strand in American fiction for a brief moment in the early 1980s, "The shock--the enigmatic refusal of easy conceptualization--that featured as an important aspect of American autonomous art is no longer seen as a way of dividing art from life. Rather, shock and enigma are seen as being flatly mimetic of contemporary experience. [They now constitute] the experience of the quotidian" (107). This adaptation to shock is the aesthetic equivalent of what Christopher Lasch characterizes as the "normalization of crisis" of everyday experience in *The Minimal Self*.

protagonist's reaction to the sound of someone on the porch and a knock on the door:

I lay still. I knew it wasn't the mailman. I knew his steps. You can't be too careful if you're out of work and you get notices in the mail or else pushed under your door. They come around wanting to talk, too, especially if you don't have a telephone. (100)

The protagonist is playing possum, hoping that if he does not reveal himself through movement, whoever is at the door will go away. The protagonist's desire to be alone, his lack of desire for company, brings to mind Kafka's burrowing animals,<sup>25</sup> and his lack of a telephone marks him as one who eschews, or cannot afford, communication with others.

The knocking persists, and eventually the protagonist's resistance to its invitation breaks down--his curiosity gets the better of his discretion. He calls through the door and a man who identifies himself as Aubrey Bell answers that he is looking for a Mrs. Slater. Boxer and Phillips suggest that his name indicates "the kind of noisy intrusiveness Carver's laconic characters desperately avoid" (87), and there is no denying that Aubrey Bell is a noisy fellow. Bell asks if the voice heard through the door belongs to Mr. Slater, and rather than either affirming or denying this the protagonist finally gets up off of the couch and opens the door. It turns out that Aubrey Bell is a vacuum cleaner salesman, and

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<sup>25</sup> Although in "The Burrow" the narrator denies building his burrow "simply out of fear" (325), in the end he admits that his burrow "could not tolerate a neighbor, at least not a clearly audible one" (358).



having got his foot in the door ("the drive finished, the railhead reached" (101)) he starts his pitch. Mrs. Slater has won "a free vacuuming and carpet shampoo. . . . No strings" (103). The protagonist attempts to make clear to Bell that he cannot hope to make a sale here, that he would be better off just leaving, but Bell can only answer to the salesman's categorical imperative--where just opening the door presumes some interest on the part of a potential customer. Bell tries to sell the protagonist on the merits of his machine, explaining what it does--picking up the bits and pieces of the self which are sloughed off every day:

You'll be suprised to see what can collect in a mattress over the months, over the years. Every day, every night of our lives, we're leaving little bits of ourselves, flakes of this and that, behind. [. . .] You would be suprised how much of us gets lost, how much of us gathers . . . over the years. (103-104)

After running the machine over the mattress, Bell opens the machine up to prove his point:

He took out the filter. This filter is just for demonstration purposes. In normal use, all of this, this *material*, would go into your bag, here, he said. He pinched some of the dusty stuff between his fingers.

There must have been a cup of it. (105)

The italics stand out here because their use is so rare in Carver's stories. Something is being emphasized here about the protagonist's physical existence: all traces of his materiality are

being removed from the environment. Aubrey Bell is cleaning up after him, cleaning him out.

After the two men finish with the mattress and the pillows, they hear the sound of mail being delivered:

I heard steps on the porch, the mail slot opened and clinked shut. We looked at each other.

He pulled on the vacuum and I followed him into the other room. We looked at the letter lying face down on the carpet, near the front door. (105-106)

The protagonist starts to move towards the letter, but then turns away from it, as if picking it up would be giving too much of himself away, would be exposing to Bell a vulnerability which he would reveal by appearing eager to retrieve the letter. In any case, the mechanical description of the prose allows little insight into either character's motivation. Aubrey Bell's wordy nattering on about W.H. Auden's slippers (101) and Rilke's death mask (104)<sup>26</sup> seems much less to the point than the silent looks he gives the protagonist now and then,<sup>27</sup> and yet the meaning of these

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<sup>26</sup> These literary references, which occur occasionally in Carver's early fiction, stand out because they seem so out of place there. It is as if he is anticipating his critics' demands for a more richly literary, intertextual fiction, and decides to throw in a few references to head them off. See also "The Student's Wife," where the husband reads Rilke to his insomniac wife (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 120), and "Where Is Everyone?," where the alcoholic father describes his hatred for his children in terms of "an extraordinary scene in a novel by an Italian named Italo Svevo" (*Fires* 175). Of course, it should be obvious by now that Carver's fiction is profoundly intertextual, but, as with the presentation of theme and meaning, the references to other texts and writers are more implicit than explicit--they do not usually announce themselves the way these isolated examples do.

<sup>27</sup> Before vacuuming the mattress: "He stared at the mattress and gave me a look out of the corner of his eye" (104); after showing the cup of dusty stuff: "He had this look to his face" (105).

looks remains utterly enigmatic and without context. So the letter, remaining on the floor by the door, exerts a certain gravity which drives the remaining action of the story. Aubrey Bell dumps an ashtray over onto the carpet and sets to work:

He took off his jacket and threw it onto the sofa. He was sweating under the arms. Fat hung over his belt. He twisted off the scoop and attached another device to the hose. He adjusted his dial. He kicked on the machine and began to move back and forth, back and forth over the worn carpet. Twice I started for the letter. But he seemed to anticipate me, cut me off, so to speak, with his hose and his pipes and his sweeping and his sweeping. . . . (106)

It is a strange dance that Bell and the protagonist make, some parody of mortal combat or hunter-prey behavior. Why doesn't the protagonist just claim his rights as occupant of the house and cross the room to pick up the letter? And how does Aubrey Bell anticipate his every move? Or is this merely a figment of the protagonist's paranoia?

After finishing vacuuming the carpet, Aubrey Bell refits the machine in order to shampoo it. The protagonist, probably feeling a little guilty about how much time this guy is spending here, again emphasizes that he could not buy the machine now even if he wanted to:

You know I can't pay anything, I said. I couldn't pay you a dollar if my life depended on it. You're going to

have to write me off as a dead loss, that's all. You're wasting your time on me, I said.

I wanted it out in the open, no misunderstanding. (106-107)

Whether Aubrey Bell hears this or cares if he does hear is unclear--he merely continues about his business. But confession does give the protagonist a certain peace of mind: "I had said all that was on my mind. I sat in the chair in the kitchen, relaxed now, and watched him work" (107). Eventually Aubrey Bell shuts off the machine, having worked himself into "a corner near the front door." The protagonist offers Bell a cup of coffee, and by the time he returns from the kitchen with two cups:

. . . he had everything dismantled and back in the case. Then he picked up the letter. He read the name on the letter and looked closely at the return address. He folded the letter in half and put it in his hip pocket. I kept watching him. That's all I did. The coffee began to cool. (107)

Turning his back on the salesman for only a few minutes allows Bell to seize possession of the letter which may constitute the protagonist's last hope to transcend his superfluosity. Bell says the letter is addressed to Mr. Slater, and since the protagonist has refused to reveal his name throughout the story ("this last vestige of self" say Boxer and Phillips (87)), he also renounces any claim to right of possession of the letter. The newly shampooed carpet is now an effective barrier, over which the protagonist will not cross

to confront Bell about the letter. Bell leaves and the protagonist remains, cleaned out.

Aubrey Bell seems to operate within the story in a way which recalls many of the characters in Flannery O'Connor's short stories. But where in O'Connor's short stories these characters operate as anagogic agents, often committing acts of evil which serve to bring the main character to a state of higher consciousness in which he or she realizes the limitations of worldly competence and morality,<sup>28</sup> in "Collectors" it is not clear what Bell accomplishes, if anything. On the one hand he is only a slightly perverse "character," going through the motions of his avocation, and perhaps even doing the protagonist a favor by taking care of the letter addressed to Mr. Slater. But on the other hand he is a much more sinister character, an almost demonic presence (surely this diabolical machine calls to mind the writing machine in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony"), forcing his way into what is left of the life of a man with little will left to resist such an intrusion, removing all traces of his physical, material existence from the environment, and then leaving with the letter which might have been precisely the one which the protagonist has been awaiting, the one which would re-connect him to humanity, or at least that part of humanity which is concerned with the pragmatics of making a living, of being a productive member of an economy. The protagonist is left alone in the end to confront what

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<sup>28</sup> The Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" challenges the grandmother's Christianity (and then kills her); the bible salesman in "Good Country People" challenges Hulga's sense of intellectual superiority (and steals her leg), etc.

little is left of his life--he now appears to be utterly superfluous, without connection to the larger economy or to such other people as would constitute a family.

The final story I would like to consider here is "The Father," which William L. Stull calls "a Kafkaesque tale of fewer than five hundred words, most of them unmediated dialogue, that charts the collapse of a young husband's identity" ("Raymond Carver Remembered" 466) and "a textbook piece on existential fear and trembling" ("Beyond Hopelessville" 3). "The Father" is, like "The Hair," a very early story, first published in 1961. The collapse of identity charted in "The Father" is more innocuous than that in "Collectors," where the figure of Aubrey Bell carries an aura of malignancy with him. Even if this attribute is difficult to locate authoritatively, and thus is somewhat ambiguous, we still know it is there--at the very least Bell is an unwanted intruder into the life of the protagonist. "The Father" is even more banal in its appropriation of Kafkaesque effects than "The Hair." Boxer and Phillips say "The Father" can be read as "Carver's homage to Kafka" (83), but "what Kafka projects through the lens of a nightmarish reality, Carver . . . forces us to see through the most conventional and habitual experiences of everyday life. It is the familiar, the seemingly 'known,' which is the true mask of the terrifying."

The situation in "The Father" is simple. All the female members of a family (grandmother, mother and three little girls) stand around the new baby, a boy, "watching it stare and

sometimes raise its fist to its mouth" (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 39). It is interesting to note that the mother is "still not herself" because she has "just gotten out of bed," which would seem to indicate sleep, the negation of waking consciousness, to be a state in which the human psyche sheds the restrictions of self-identity. The father sits alone in the kitchen "with his back to them" (40). Boxer and Phillips suggest that he does this "in the aloof style of a man bored with women-talk" (83), in this case pertaining to the resemblance of the baby to various relatives "in the fatuous way that such things are discussed." The women are able to assign origins to parts of the baby (fingers like mother, lips like grandfather), but are unable to determine who he looks like as a whole person. It is the daughter named Phyllis who makes the cognitive breakthrough, that "He doesn't look like anybody" (40). Her sister Carol adds to this proposition: "He looks like Daddy." So now, logically, if the baby looks like his father, then they can determine who the baby looks like by figuring out who the father looks like. But conversely, according to the logic of syllogisms, if the baby does not look like anybody and the father looks like the baby, then the father does not look like anybody either. When Phyllis figures this out--that her father looks like "nobody--" she begins "to cry a little." All the little girls are upset by the thought that their father bears no physical resemblance to anyone else: "'But he has to look like *somebody*,' Phyllis said, wiping her eyes with one of the ribbons." The focus of all attention now shifts from the baby to the father, who "had turned around in

his chair and his face was white and without expression." As Boxer and Phillips interpret the ending: "His is the face of fear; it is drained of expression and identity. The comfortable fellow known as Daddy has been erased" (83).

What Carver accomplishes in this story, as artificial as it seems, is to subject one of the most banal situations imaginable to a scrutiny which reveals what Gary Fisketjon once referred to as "the terrifying implications of Normal Life" (132). Our existence as humans is defined by various relationships--what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as territorializations. The family is the most basic social territorialization of bourgeois life, just as the self is the most basic psychological territorialization. But the self is only a necessary fiction in late capitalist society--a world made up of actual separate selves would be much too difficult to manage. Individuals are peddled the mystique of self just as they are sold any other commodity, and they are largely defined through their purchases, whether material or psychic. Deleuze and Guattari assert that a minor literature such as Kafka's confronts the false "individual concern" (71) of commodity capitalism with a writing as the machine of expression, "the machinic assemblage of desire [which] is also the collective assemblage of enunciation" (82). Such a concept, of writing as the collective assemblages of desire and enunciation, opens up the possibility of points of deterritorialization, "lines of escape" (86), and allows the penetration of "*an unlimited field of immanence* that makes the segments melt and that liberates desire from all its concretizations



and abstractions." So the moments of deterritorialization which we see in Carver's fiction are the utopian counterpoint to the alienated reality which is the fundamental basis of its content. As Kaufmann explains, in a world where naive dreams of enlightenment have been officially discredited, "state management of economic crises causes crisis tendencies to appear in non-economic forms . . . crises of economic reproduction are repressed, displaced, and return in odd guises . . . as crises of symbolic reproduction" (109). In the cracks of the monolithic economic superstructure which dominates the existence of Carver's characters we can locate all their aspirations to a better way of being--their desire for a body which is their own, and which they can take pleasure in, their desire for dignity and meaning and worth.

## V. The Function of Family in the Carver Chronotope

### A. Introduction: Family Life

In the last chapter we looked at the territorialization of self in the Carver chronotope, and the relations between body and self which help to constitute Carver's use of some of the conventions of grotesque realism. As well, we came to a definition of Carver's minimalism which takes into account both historical and formal concerns. Now it is time to turn our attention from the isolated individual to the individual as he or she occurs in the most basic of human relationships. The family is the most basic social territorializing institution of bourgeois life, just as the self is the most basic psychological unit. The idea of family holds a special and paradoxical position in the contemporary imagination. It is at once the origin and cause of much of what we deem to be good in humanity--evoking values of emotional warmth, stability, loyalty, trust and authority--and yet at the same time the family is now generally acknowledged to be the site of much of the violence, terror and misery which occurs in contemporary society. It is no coincidence that the idea of the family is central to the Carver chronotope.

The idea of family is universal if not essential--it is found in nearly all human societies--but the content of the concept varies in time and geographical place. The idea of family which concerns us here is the concept of the nuclear family in postwar America. It is taken as a given that if the family partakes of the kind of positive values listed above, the children who grow up in its bosom will develop into people who will in turn wish to establish families of equal integrity to raise their own children. This is the core of the official version of the mythology of the family in the American imagination, which generally assumes that the majority of American families reflect what is, in essence, more a product of their reactionary aspirations than a lived reality.

However, in recent years, this official, utopian mythology of the American family has come under attack, largely through the widespread dissemination of anecdotal and statistical evidence in the mass media suggesting the predominance of the so-called dysfunctional family. As a result of the relentless stream of information detailing the collapse of traditional family values in every aspect of their existence, Americans have had to confront the possibility that the family has not been working as well as had always been supposed, and that the values of this most basic territorialization of bourgeois life are perhaps irreconcilable with those of late capitalism.

Very few of the families portrayed in Raymond Carver's fiction reflect the utopian ideal of the American family. For precisely this reason Carver has been subject to attack from critics

of the political right, especially after he became well-known in the mid 1980s. In an interview conducted by Nicholas O'Connell in 1986, one of a series of interviews with writers from the Pacific Northwest,<sup>1</sup> Carver expresses his disdain for these critics:

I've been beaten over the head by some critics, mainly conservative critics. Someone wrote a long essay against my work in *The New Criterion* a year or so ago, saying that the picture I portray of America is not a happy one; that my characters are not real Americans; that they should be happier and find more satisfaction in this life; that I'm concentrating on showing the dark underbelly of things. This was a real political interpretation of my stories. (147)

Here Carver foregrounds his self-consciously naive and deliberate craftsman's attitude towards his material, his belief that the best fiction is apolitical, an idea which is central to Carver's construction of himself as the writer-figure. Central here is the rejection of the political as a motive for writing--we are not to understand his depiction of the "dark underbelly" of American family life as the work of a moralist. Indeed, Carver's narrative strategy never involves the stratification of narrator and character which usually indicates a critical and moralistic agenda on the part of the writer. Instead, Carver's narrators usually operate at about the same level as the characters they narrate;

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<sup>1</sup> *At the Field's End: Interviews with Twenty Pacific Northwest Writers*. Seattle: Madrona, 1987.

they seem to understand neither more nor less about the fictional situation than either the characters or the reader, and they do not attempt to contextualize and explain as does conventional narration.

As I suggested in the opening chapters, Carver's narrators are incapable of criticizing the characters they tell us about because they identify with them so closely. Carver hints at this in an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, conducted in 1984 for the famous "minimalism" issue of the *Mississippi Review* (40/41: Winter 1985), and later included in a collection of interviews with American authors of the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> When asked about the distinctiveness of his characters and their inability to articulate themselves, Carver replies:

. . . I feel perfectly comfortable with these people while I'm working. I've known people like this all my life. Essentially, I *am* one of those confused, befuddled people, I come from people like that, those are the people I've worked with and earned my living beside for years. . . . The things that have made an indelible impression on me are the things I saw in lives I witnessed being lived around me, and in the life I myself lived. (112)

The emphasis on the present tense of the verb "to be" in this passage indicates a degree of identification between writer, narrator and character rarely admitted to in contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> *Alive and Writing*. Urbana: Illinois UP, 1987.

literary culture, and also seems to tacitly validate a reading strategy which moves beyond identification to an objective appreciation of what is happening in the stories.

One methodology which seems entirely appropriate to an understanding of family relations, and which is inherently suspicious of all tendencies to identification, is psychoanalysis. In an interview with David Applefield conducted in 1987, Carver responds to Applefield's assertion that his characters "reflect certain classic psychological tendencies": "I don't feel adequate saying anything about the subject of psychology or psychiatry. I wish I could! I haven't read any of the great ones you mention [Freud and Jung], nor the lesser lights, either" (212). Carver's refusal to comment on the psychology of his characters is interesting in at least two ways: the expression of a feeling of inadequacy is itself a possible subject of psychological inquiry, and the justification for his refusal to comment, which Carver provides with his characteristic, self-effacing honesty, suggests that there is some inner compulsion to hold back.

Certainly not having read Freud and Jung in the original stops very few people in our culture, including academics, from talking as if they know their work intimately; and the ideas of these two great psychologists are among those which have been so widely disseminated through the institutions of education and media that it is hardly necessary to have read them to believe one understands the basic concepts. Carver's refusal to comment strikes one as much a result of a fear of appearing stupid before

the experts as of a fanatical integrity. A third aspect of Carver's refusal to comment on the psychology of his characters is the lack of hostility which he displays towards the discipline of psychology itself, which makes the critic feel more comfortable in applying it to Carver's work.

When one begins to read Carver's stories with an eye to interpreting the family situations in them, one is struck by the marked similarities between the various families which appear in various stories, patterns also picked up in the poems and autobiographical essays. Such a pattern, whether intentional or not, would seem to point toward the validity of an interpretation of family life based upon the Freudian concept of repetition. In this mode of interpretation, the critic as analyst understands the writer's acts of writing, and the literary documents themselves, as a strategy for avoiding remembrance of the "situations which had given rise to the formation of the symptom" (Freud 147): the writer "repeats everything that has already made its way from the sources of the repressed into his manifest personality--his inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes and his pathological character traits" (151).

In a writer whose work derives so obviously from the life-world of its creator, the work itself might be seen as a part of this manifest personality. Carver's expressed belief "that a writer's tone is his signature" supports such an assertion. In the interview with John Alton where Carver makes this statement, he goes on to say: "I don't think a *tone* is just cobbled up by a writer. It's the

way the writer looks at the world, and he brings his view to bear on the work at hand. And it can't help but infuse nearly every line he writes" (155). The apparently involuntary tone which Carver describes here suggests that repressed aspects of the manifest personality might be understood as working themselves out through the process of writing fiction. What holds the process back, keeping the writer from working through all his inhibitions, unserviceable attitudes and pathological character traits early on in a career as a writer, is resistance. As Freud states: "The greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering" (151). A writer who is mining his subconscious for material has no real interest in working through his problems to achieve resolution, for then he would be faced with the problem of starting all over again, with a new set of motivations for writing. Resistance is thus the ally of the writer who bases much of his fiction on his own experience of life in the world, resistance is what he writes and struggles against. Later in the same essay Freud outlines a course of treatment for neurotic behavior (repetition of behaviors which do not achieve satisfactory results for their subject), which in the context I am constructing here stands as a description of the struggle which is Carver's career as a writer of fiction, which in this instance can be seen as a project for working through his feelings about family life:

He [the patient/writer] must find the courage to direct his attention to the phenomena of his illness. His



illness itself must no longer seem to him contemptible, but must become an enemy worthy of his mettle, a piece of his personality, which has solid ground for its existence and out of which things of value for his future life have to be derived. The way is thus paved from the beginning for a reconciliation with the repressed material which is coming to expression in his symptoms, while at the same time place is found for a certain tolerance for the state of being ill. (152)

While there is ample evidence that Carver had achieved at least some reconciliation with his feelings about family in his personal life, he did not live long enough for this reconciliation to find adequate expression in his fiction, with perhaps the exception of "Elephant," a story from the final collection, *Where I'm Calling From*, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

The potential for the application of Freudian techniques and terminology to an understanding of Carver's fiction has been suggested by Elliot Malamet in an essay entitled "Raymond Carver and the Fear of Narration." In this essay Malamet explains the oft-cited inarticulateness of Carver's characters in terms of a fear of, or resistance to, full narration. According to Malamet, if we understand

the idea of narrative as a process of return in order to understand this fear of self-disclosure; [then] it is as though the speaker secretly (and justifiably) harbors the suspicion that reviving the past through words will

be somehow to recreate it. This is, perhaps, simply another way of saying that often we choose not to speak of experiences whose resurrection, even if solely within the borders of a piece of narrative, would be too painful to endure yet again. The text is not only filled with apprehensiveness about recurrence, but also signals how this anxiety over repetition is then linked to narrative restraint. . . . (69)

Malamet chooses to restrict his analysis of narrative restraint to the formal texts of the stories, venturing only so far as to admit the possibility of treating "other textual items surrounding the narrator as suggestive of his condition . . . [rather than simply accepting] the story as a self-contained entity that deliberately obscures any hermeneutical extension of its surface presentation." But even allowing for consideration of other meaningful textual items in any given story, Malamet resists widening his focus beyond the analysis of the characters within that story; refusing to recognize the proliferation of characters with similar psychological traits as evidence of repetition on the part of the controlling authorial intelligence which lurks behind the restricted narrative intelligence. Malamet sees "the withdrawal of Carver's characters, the 'shrinking' into an inner world where they are often held in the grip of deep psychic wounds that evade their self-understanding, [as] part of an authorial enterprise of considerable aesthetic sophistication and psychological depth" (60).

While I certainly agree with Malmst's assertion that "the difficulty in articulating their experiences that plagues [Carver's] characters is part of a complex narrative strategy" which captures "the ambivalence that they feel about their own lives," I would argue that an extension of this line of inquiry which takes into account Carver's poems and autobiographical essays will demonstrate how the repetition of characters with certain attitudes towards the idea and reality of family life might lead us to an understanding of Carver's stories as working through his sense of ambivalence about the lives he has led.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the interviews, Carver repeatedly refers to his life being divided into two separate lives. The date dividing these lives is 2 June 1977, the day he quit drinking (Simpson and Buzbee 38). In the "Paris Review Interview," Carver is asked if he has any regrets about his old life: "I can't afford to regret. That life is simply gone now, and I can't regret its passing. I have to live in the present. The life back then is gone just as surely--it's as remote to me as if it had happened to somebody I read about in a nineteenth century novel. I don't spend more than five minutes a month in the past. The past really is a foreign country, and they do things differently there. Things happen. I really do feel I've had two different lives" (Simpson and Buzbee 46). The old life is associated with his first wife, Maryann, and the second with Tess Gallagher. Douglas Unger, Carver's brother-in-law, describes how Carver's "life with Maryann was over, however much they still loved and cared for one another until his death. Ray was in love with Tess and was completely with her in his new life. He'd speak of the old life and the new life. The old life had a great many good things in it, but it ended with all the drinking and the 'bad old days' and he'd never want to go back to that. . . . The new life was a life of acceptance" (Halpert 69). The gratitude which Carver felt at being granted a second life is best expressed in the poem "Gravy," from *A New Path to the Waterfall*:

No other word will do. For that's what it was. Gravy.  
 Gravy, these past ten years.  
 Alive, sober, working, loving and  
 being loved by a good woman. Eleven years  
 ago he was told he had six months to live  
 at the rate he was going. And he was going  
 nowhere but down. So he changed his ways  
 somehow. He quit drinking! And the rest?  
 After that it was *all* gravy, every minute  
 of it, up to and including when he was told about,  
 well, some things that were breaking down and  
 building up inside his head. "Don't weep for me,"

I will concentrate my examination of family life on relationships between parents and children, discussing spousal relationships only insofar as they pertain directly to the illumination of issues surrounding relationships between parents and children, as these relationships between adults have already been discussed extensively, most notably by Kirk Nessel in "'This Word Love': Sexual Politics and Silence in Early Raymond Carver."<sup>4</sup> The preceding chapters of this work form the context in which the mythology of family life is to be understood. The second chapter, on the construction of the writer-figure, describes the vehicle of expression for all ideas contained thereafter. The third chapter, on the wilderness idyll, introduces the first level of territorialization in Carver's fiction, that of physical setting and the psycho-social phenomena associated with a sense of place. In short, the setting of Carver's fiction is a landscape of despair, a generic place lacking in the kind of qualities that would set it apart from all others, more a placelessness, where the inhabitants feel little sense of connection or belonging.<sup>5</sup>

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he said to his friends. "I'm a lucky man.  
I've had ten years longer than I or anyone  
expected. Pure gravy. And don't forget it." (118)

<sup>4</sup> The work that has been done tends to restrict its focus to the formal parameters of the stories, and largely rejects the use of autobiographical material to supplement the reading of the stories themselves. The principle of repetition is at work in Carver's treatment of spousal relationships as well.

<sup>5</sup> In the "*Paris Review* Interview," Carver says: "the majority of my stories are not set in any specific locale . . . they could take place in just about any city or urban area . . ." (Simpson and Buzbee 51). In the Nicholas O'Connell interview, Carver comments on the lack of particularity and definition of physical place in his fiction: "landmarks and guides aren't terribly necessary in my stories. . . . I was rootless for so many years and didn't have any real *place* or location, some of the things that are so nurturing for a writer" (134-35).

Intimately connected to the physical rootlessness of the characters in Carver's fiction is their sense of the body as an alien land in itself, the territorialization which is the focus of the fourth chapter here. Just as the kinds of places where the characters find themselves are largely determined by vague economic forces, so are the selves they find occupying their bodies. The body itself, rather than being the locus of the freedom of the individual, is shown to be the site of colonization by the forces of commodity capitalism. The characters who inhabit the Carver chronotope are alienated from the places where they live and from themselves. It will be the purpose of this chapter to show how these alienations effect their relations with those others who are most closely bound to them in a society which takes the family unit as the basic unit of social territorialization.

## **B. Relations Between Children and Parents**

A convenient place to start making concrete the issues I have introduced here is to refer again to the early story, "Nobody Said Anything." In this story the lack of attention which the parents pay to their children is significant.<sup>6</sup> In a note in the third

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<sup>6</sup> The motif of neglected children is most conspicuous in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, the first collection of stories. In "What's In Alaska," for instance, a group of archetypal seventies parents, gathered at night to try out a new waterpipe, laugh about one of them "still [being] stoned when she got up with the kids" (80) in the morning. In "What Do You Do In San Francisco?", despite the fact that neither parent has a job, the kids still seem to be left to their own devices. Whenever the mailman comes by: "the kids [are] always there, running

chapter I compared the active role which Nick Adams' father takes in the wilderness education of his son in the Hemingway story "Fathers and Sons" with the passive role R.'s father takes in "Nobody Said Anything," when he sat in his car smoking while his sons were out fishing, unable to move outside the confines of a narrowly-defined self-interest to consider their needs. The father's angry rejection of the fish-offering was just another argument in a house where such demonstrations of ill will were a daily occurrence. It is useful to look at this particular scene again in order to try to understand how this family interacts:

I heard their voices and looked through the window. They were sitting at the table. Smoke was all over the kitchen. I saw it was coming from a pan on the burner. But neither of them paid any attention.

"What I'm telling you is the gospel truth," he said. "What do kids know? You'll see."

She said, "I'll see nothing. If I thought that, I'd rather see them dead first."

He said, "What's the matter with you? You better be careful what you say!"

She started to cry. He smashed out a cigaret in the ashtray and stood up.

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in and out of the house or playing in the vacant lot next door" (115). Most often their "mama and daddy [are] nowheres to be seen" (113). In later collections the motif of neglected children is replaced by a much harsher motif of outright abuse.

"Edna, do you know this pan is burning up?" he said.

She looked at the pan. She pushed her chair back and grabbed the pan by its handle and threw it against the wall over the sink.

He said, "Have you lost your mind? Look what you've done! He took a dish cloth and began to wipe up stuff from the pan. (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 58)

This scene evokes a number of strong responses in a reader, first and foremost a metaphor of the family home as madhouse. Just as nobody in the town where they all live says anything about the "black ring of stuff" which the smudgepots lit to keep the orchards from freezing in the autumn evenings produce in the noses of their children (45), nobody in this house pays attention to what is going on there, as evidenced by all the smoke billowing from the stovetop. Nobody takes responsibility for what is happening. The atmosphere is charged with the threat of violence, and then the language of violence gives way to an actual act of violence. The situation is out of control--neither of the parents is capable of taking any care in choosing their words or restraining their actions; the hatred which they feel towards each other must find expression with no regard for the consequences. The children, those who are so callously referred to as being incapable of understanding what is happening here, are made to witness this hatred as a fact, as an ongoing part of their everyday lives.

The metaphor of the home as a madhouse populated by lunatics is precisely that dark underbelly of family life which Carver refers to in the Nicholas O'Connell interview. In the home as madhouse, relations between parents and children are marked by a profound incoherence of authority, often most apparent in the relations between the father, the locus of authority in the traditional American family structure, and his sons. In the poem "The Kitchen," another boy makes his entrance into the madhouse through the kitchen. Upon returning from a traumatic fishing experience, the boy finds his father with a strange woman sitting on his lap, drinking a beer. Both are obviously drunk. The woman has

. . . part of a front tooth  
 missing. She tried to grin as she rose  
 to her feet. My dad stayed where he was, staring at me  
 as if he didn't recognize his own get. *Here,*  
*what is it, boy?* he said. *What happened,*  
*son?* Swaying against the sink, the woman wet her lips  
 and waited for whatever was to happen next.  
 My dad waited too, there in his old place  
 at the kitchen table, the bulge in his pants  
 subsiding. We all waited and wondered  
 at the stuttered syllables, the words made to cling  
 as anguish that poured from my raw young mouth.  
 (*A New Path to the Waterfall* 38)



The effect of the woman's disfigurement ("What does he see in her?" the son might think) and of the father's slow recognition of his own offspring (which would seem to indicate that the father is in a state where he can hardly recall himself), their inebriation and lurid sensuality, combine to throw the boy's understanding of the world askew. A strange, frightening passivity falls over all of them, as if they are waiting for someone else to walk in and take control, to explain to them what is happening here and why they are doing what they are doing and what they should do next. Finally the silence is broken by the boy's expression of grief at the loss he has just realized, the loss of a father. The father has forfeited any moral claim to authority in the family home, leaving behind a void.<sup>7</sup>

Between "Nobody Said Anything" and "The Kitchen," most of the qualities which constitute the family home as madhouse are present--adultery, alcoholism, violence of word and deed, and the general neglect of children by their parents. Only one aspect of the dysfunctional family in Carver Country has not been introduced, the very one which serves to exaggerate the effect of all the others--a lack of financial stability. Most of Carver's characters are drawn from the class of people amongst whom Carver himself spent most of his life, the working poor or struggling, lower-middle class. These are people who have internalized most of the

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<sup>7</sup> The idea of adultery as forming an impediment to communication between a father and son is addressed by Michael Vander Weele in his essay, "Raymond Carver and the Language of Desire" (114-16). The story Vander Weele refers to there is "Sacks," from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

values of a consumerist culture, but who lack the necessary income to fulfill what they understand their place in this culture ought to be. In the McCaffery/Gregory interview, Carver talks about "people [who] really *were* scared when someone knocked on their door, day or night, or when the telephone rang; they didn't know how they were going to pay for the rent or what they could do if the refrigerator went out" (112).<sup>8</sup> Carver's fiction is filled with families where the lack of money serves to make virtually every aspect of life more difficult than it would be otherwise. One fairly innocuous example occurs in the story "Night School," from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* In this story the lack of money in the household keeps the father from being able to help out his adult son, who has moved back home after separating from his wife, as much as he would like to:

My father didn't have a job. He used to work in the woods, and then he got hurt. He'd had a settlement, but most of that was gone now. I asked him for a loan of two hundred dollars when my wife left me, but he refused. He had tears in his eyes when he said no and said he hoped I wouldn't hold it against him. I'd said it was all right, I wouldn't hold it against him. (97)

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<sup>8</sup> Note the references to situations evoked in Carver's stories here: the fear of someone coming to the door in "Collectors" (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*), as discussed in the fourth chapter, and the refrigerator breakdown in "Preservation" (*Cathedral*). For an excellent discussion of the latter story, which I do not cover here, see Barbara Henning's essay, "Minimalism and the American Dream."

Poverty seems to be the only real problem in this family, and yet this alone is enough to cast a thick pall of depression over their lives. Economic standing is perhaps the single most important force in determining the fate of the characters who inhabit the Carver chronotope.

Another family which keenly feels the stress which results from trying to get by on less than they think they need is found in "The Student's Wife," also from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* This story describes an episode of insomnia suffered by Nan, the wife of the student, Mike.<sup>9</sup> Nan has woken from a strange dream, which she insists on telling to Mike:

. . . we were staying someplace overnight. I don't know where the kids were, but it was just the two of us at some little hotel or something. It was on some lake which wasn't familiar. There was another, older, couple there and they wanted to take us for a ride in their motorboat. . . . [They] had just one seat in the boat, a kind of bench up in the front, and it was only big enough for three. You and I started arguing about who was going to sacrifice and sit all cooped up in the back. You said you were, and I said I was. But I finally squeezed in the back of the boat. It was so narrow it hurt my legs, and I was afraid the water was going to come in over the sides. (121-22)

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<sup>9</sup> Ernest L. Fontana discusses insomnia as motif in this story and others in his essay, "Insomnia in Raymond Carver's Fiction."

Arthur M. Saltzman mentions the idea of sacrifice in his brief interpretation of the story in *Understanding Raymond Carver* (50-51), but then does not develop it. Clearly the idea of sacrifice is central to an understanding of the family situation here. Everyone in this family has to sacrifice for Mike to pursue his studies, which seem quite vague in their focus.<sup>10</sup> That Nan is compelled to account for the whereabouts of the children in her dream would seem to indicate that she is primarily responsible for raising them, despite the fact that she must also hold down a job in order to support them all--hers is the plight of the typical married woman in a late capitalist economy, who has to work, in effect, two jobs. Her fear of the boat becoming swamped reflects her anxiety concerning her family--she fears that if something bad were to happen they would not have the resources to bail themselves out.

Later in the story Nan lists all the things she likes in an effort to lull herself to sleep. After exhausting the list of pleasures, intellectual, social and sensual, her concerns turn pragmatic:

I'd like to be able to buy the kids nice clothes every time they need it without having to wait. . . . And I'd like us to have a place of our own. I'd like to stop moving around every year, or every other year. Most

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<sup>10</sup> Mike is representative of a number of characters in Carver's fiction who ask their families to sacrifice so that they can achieve their own goals. Others include the artist-mothers in "What Do You Do in San Francisco" (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*) and "Fever" (*Cathedral*). Robert Coles, when reading "The Student's Wife," recalled William Carlos Williams's "lectures on the distinction between 'big-shot learning' . . . and 'our daily conduct' . . . . To read Rilke and be unable to meet the challenge a marriage presents is to be yet another bright failure" (223).

of all . . . I'd like us just to live a good honest life without having to worry about money and bills and things like that. (126)

Whether these are actual needs is irrelevant--in a consumerist, capitalistic economy the perception of a need is indistinguishable from a real need, at least to the subject who feels it. Nan does not come out and say it, but the reader still suspects that it is because Mike chooses to be a perpetual student that the children must wait for new clothes and the whole family has to uproot itself every year or two.

It is, I think, significant that the family situation in "The Student's Wife" is very similar to that of the young Carver family in the 1960s. Maryann Carver sacrificed herself in order to support Raymond in his efforts to become a writer. In Sam Halpert's book of literary reminiscence, *When We Talk About Raymond Carver*, Maryann relates how "although [she] was the one with the high grades and the law school scholarship" (80), it was Raymond who got to go to college first. Douglas Unger emphasizes that it was Maryann who took on more than her share of the burden, of both domestic tasks and financial survival: "She had always worked. More than Ray, she paid the bills and supported the family and did everything else. But ends just didn't meet in that house" (Halpert 57). Clearly the atmosphere of a story like "The Student's Wife" is one Carver knew intimately. Supplementing our reading of the story with biographical material leaves the reader feeling that Nan had every right to ask Mike to

rub her aching legs, whether it is the middle of the night or not, because those legs were supporting him as well as her and the children.

It is largely through parents that children learn their values in Carver's fiction. The agency of fathers in the transmission of values is significant in a number of stories, although very few of the children receive the kind of formal exhortation to middle-class life which Ralph Wyman does in the title story from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*:

When he was eighteen and leaving home for the first time, Ralph Wyman was counseled by his father, principal of Jefferson Elementary School and trumpet soloist in the Waterville Elks Club Auxiliary Band, that life was a very serious matter, an enterprise insisting on strength and purpose in a young person just setting out, an arduous undertaking, everyone knew that, but nevertheless a rewarding one. . . . (225)

Of course this speech, reminiscent of Polonius' advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*, does not seem to do young Ralph much good. But Ralph Wyman is not a typical Raymond Carver character--he is of a higher economic stratum which we rarely see in Carver's fiction until the later stories of *Cathedral* and *Where I'm Calling From* ("The Bath" and the title story from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* are other notable exceptions).

Generally, the children in Carver's fiction tend to learn their values from the examples which their fathers set for them rather

than from fine speeches. One lesson which they inevitably learn concerns relativity and the slipperiness of language. A simple word like bankruptcy, which would surely mark its victims with a large, scarlet "B" in the conceptual universe presided over by members of the Weaverville Elks Club, is seen to sometimes be a fate for people who are always living on the edge of financial disaster, and sometimes even can come to be seen as positive. In the story "What Is It", from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*,<sup>11</sup> Leo sends his wife out to do whatever it takes to sell their big convertible before their bankruptcy is finalized.<sup>12</sup> Leo waits around the house, drinking heavily, fully aware of what his wife is probably going to have to do to pull off a good deal on such short notice. His feelings about the impending bankruptcy are mixed; his behavior indicates that he is utterly miserable, but the state of being which he will enjoy after the court hearing on Monday is described as "home free" (206), a terminology suggesting an almost childlike state of freedom from worry. At one point during the night:

He recalls when he was a kid his dad pointing at a fine house, a tall white house surrounded by apple trees and a high white rail fence. "That's Finch," his dad said admiringly. "He's been in bankruptcy at least twice.

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<sup>11</sup> This story appears, in slightly different form, as "Are These Actual Miles?" in *Where I'm Calling From*.

<sup>12</sup> Maryann Carver: "I actually went out and sold my Pontiac convertible. It was my car, and I sold it, but how I sold it was nobody's business. Ray's story wasn't life. It was his story from an incident in our lives that captured his imagination. . ." (Halpert 98).

Look at that house." But bankruptcy is a company collapsing utterly, executives cutting their wrists and throwing themselves from windows, thousands of men on the street. (209-10)

That bankruptcy can be both a mere strategy for getting around an unmanageable debt in order to start anew and utter catastrophe with dire consequences for thousands of people indicates that Leo inhabits a world where much depends on perspective, and where morality is not a simple black and white business as it is for Ralph Wyman's father.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to note that the reason for Leo and Toni getting into this mess in the first place is that both were trying to compensate for the relative poverty of their own childhoods:

Food, that was one of the big items. They gorged on food. He figures thousands on luxury items alone. Toni would go to the grocery and put in everything she saw. "I had to do without when I was a kid," she says. "These kids are not going to do without," as if he'd been insisting they should. She joins all the book clubs. "We never had books around when I was a kid," she says as she tears open the heavy packages. (210)

This family is like the Carver family, "made / to squander, not collect" ("To My Daughter," *Where Water Comes Together With*

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<sup>13</sup> Arthur M. Saltzman glosses over this ambivalence when he states that Leo learned as a child that bankruptcy is not an "exotic term reserved for huge companies and mythic executives but an immediate, indiscriminate scourge" (66). Certainly Finch has worked his way through his scourging by bankruptcy quite successfully.



*Other Water* 28).<sup>14</sup> Their intentions are good but their execution flawed. They have succumbed to one of the traps inherent in commodification: they have become the consumers who demand immediate gratification and deny themselves and their children nothing, and in so doing fail to become self-denying producers willing to sacrifice personal fulfillment to the attainment of financial goals. This is an example of what Daniel Bell characterizes as a central contradiction of advanced capitalism, that the culture of consumption undermines industrial discipline.<sup>15</sup> In other words, advanced capitalism is based on the breakdown of the connection of the work ethic with the ethic of consumption. Leo and Toni are of a generation which has given up on saving for the future, as previous generations raised in scarcity have tended to do in the past.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Carvers declared bankruptcy on at least one occasion. Maryann Carver explains: "Well, we did get into debt in Sacramento. It was a debt we had been paying, and I expected to continue making the payments. Ray got tired of that and suggested bankruptcy. We had a major disagreement about that. I was adamantly opposed to it--adamantly, adamantly, adamantly opposed to it" (Halpert 99). That Maryann believed Ray's attitude towards bankruptcy was determined by the differences in the values they internalized as children is made clear when she says: "My family upbringing was different. My family were teachers and landowners. My mother was a teacher" (Halpert 99). Obviously, Maryann is implying here that she married down in linking her fortunes to the son of a Yakima saw-filer, and that Raymond's working-class values sometimes clashed with her middle-class ones. David Swainger recalls how the Carvers started to live beyond their means in Palo Alto in the 1970s: "There was a poignant surge towards normalcy, impelled by Maryann despite the boozy film she and Ray spread over everything. Ray both complained and bragged that among their expenses was the boarding fee for a horse Maryann had bought their teenage daughter" (80).

<sup>15</sup> *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (quoted in Lasch 27).

<sup>16</sup> For example, people who grew up in the great depression of the 1930s often refuse to believe that they have ever achieved enough wealth to protect themselves from the kind of disaster they experienced then.

One of Randolph Paul Runyon's few strong connections between Carver's stories concerns "What Is It?" and two other stories, "How About This?" and "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets," where children learn from their fathers (76) in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* In all three stories, children are inducted into a world of moral ambivalence. Young Leo's lesson about bankruptcy is echoed in the reminiscence of a woman who has returned to her childhood home after many years in "How About This?":

"Once Dad shot a deer out of season. I was about--I don't know--eight or nine, around in there. . . . Dad was down here in the barn with the deer when the game warden drove into the yard. It was dark. Mother sent me down here for Dad, and the game warden, a big heavysset man with a hat, followed me. Dad was carrying a lamp, just coming down from the loft. He and the game warden talked a few minutes. The deer was hanging there, but the game warden didn't say anything. He offered Dad a chew of tobacco, but Dad refused--he never had liked it and wouldn't take any even then. Then the game warden pulled my ear and left. . . ." (188-89)

Emily, the speaker here, witnessed this scene at a young and impressionable age, as did Leo. But where with Leo's memory we cannot be sure that we are dealing with anything but the suggestion of wrongdoing on the part of his father (it is not made clear whether or not Leo's father ever declared bankruptcy

himself), Emily witnesses her father's confrontation with authority. The interaction between the two men suggests the confusion of morality inherent in the situation. That the whole scene occurs in the dark adds to the atmosphere of ominousness. The father's refusal of the offer of a chew of tobacco would seem to indicate the existence of a line over which he will not cross--even though he has been caught with the goods he will not be coerced into betraying his dignity. We are not made privy to the content of the exchange which occurred between the two men--what made an impression on young Emily was not so much what they said but their attitude and positioning. Most significant is that which is not mentioned--any reference to the deer which hangs there, right under their noses. Obviously some kind of deal is made, but we do not know if there is an explicit agreement struck between the two men or whether they are acting out a formalized ritual of life in the country. In any case, the gesture the game warden makes before leaving, touching Emily, strikes the reader as an unwanted intimacy, an act which makes a profound impression on the young girl. It is clear that her father's act has made her vulnerable to authority in ways which she does not yet have the capacity to understand, but which still makes her feel very uncomfortable.

In "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts," we again see how a sense of moral ambivalence is transmitted from generation to generation. In this story, Evan Hamilton, already edgy because it has "been two days since [he had] stopped smoking" (193), is called to one of

his son's friend's houses in order to resolve a dispute over a trashed bicycle. His wife volunteers to go instead of him, realizing just how rotten he feels, but Evan feels compelled to go himself (194). He is escorted there by an "older boy he had never seen before" (193). Soon Evan finds himself in unfamiliar territory:

They turned a corner. . . . Hamilton saw an orchard, and then they turned another corner onto a dead-end street. He hadn't known of the existence of this street and was sure he would not recognize any of the people who lived here. He looked around him at the unfamiliar houses and was struck with the range of his son's personal life. (195)

This aspect of "defamiliarization" (Saltzman 62) is worth emphasizing. The fact that only a few blocks from his own house Evan Hamilton finds himself out of his element reinforces the alienating landscape of the Carver chronotope and the lack of a sense of community found among its inhabitants. The fact that Evan Hamilton becomes aware that his son's life has already surpassed his in certain areas forces him to start to realize what every parent must eventually--that their children will grow away from them and become independent.

When Hamilton arrives at his destination a sort of kitchen-table tribunal ensues, presided over by the mother of the boy whose bike was damaged. Two of the accused boys, Evan's son Roger and his friend Kip, admit to "rolling" the bike: "Sending it down the street with a push and letting it fall over" (197). Then

they "took it up to the school and threw it against a goalpost." The third boy, Gary Berman, who Roger claims was choking him out in the garage before Hamilton arrived (196), denies any involvement in the incident. Mr. Berman arrives and immediately tries to take control of the situation. When Gary and his father leave the room to talk in privacy, Hamilton feels "he should stop them, this secrecy" (199). After a short while the Bermans return, and Gary announces that: "It was Roger's idea to roll it." Roger denies this, and says that it was all Gary's idea. Mr. Berman tells Roger to shut up, that he will "handle this" (200). Hamilton tells Berman that he is "getting out of line," to which the latter replies: "I think you'd do better to mind your own business." At this point Hamilton decides that there is nothing further to be gained here, and tells the woman that they are going but that Roger will pay for his share of the damage to her son's bike. When Berman says that Roger is a "jerk," Hamilton warns him: "I think you're seriously out of line here tonight. . . . Why don't you get control of yourself?" Hamilton sends Roger and Kip out the door ahead of him, and when Berman brushes his shoulder on the way out, Hamilton knocks him down, wrestles him onto his back, and begins "to pound his head against the lawn" (201). As Saltzman points out, Hamilton "amazes himself" (63) by his actions: "He couldn't believe it was happening" (201).

But it did happen. A father's attempt to take part in a rational resolution to a problem involving ideals of justice and retribution has deteriorated into clan conflict. Hamilton worries

that he has given his son the wrong lesson, and tells him: "I'm sorry you had to see something like that" (202). The tears which Hamilton's violence have inspired in his son dry as they make their way home. Roger asks his father: "What if he'd picked up a knife, Dad? Or a club?" Hamilton tries to reassure his son that Mr. Berman do no such thing, but ultimately he has to admit to his son that: "It's hard to say what people will do when they're angry. . . ." Hamilton knows that violence has a way of escalating, but when put to the test, in his vulnerable condition, he was not able to turn the other cheek, to take the moral high-ground. Sitting by himself on the porch after Roger has gone in for his dinner, Hamilton remembers how:

He had once seen his father--a pale, slow talking man with slumped shoulders--in something like this. It was a bad one, and both men had been hurt. It had happened in a cafe. The other man was a farmhand. Hamilton had loved his father and could recall many things about him. But now he recalled his father's one fistfight as if it were all there was to the man. (203)

It is now clear that Hamilton's violent outburst has forged another link in a chain of violence which connects at least three generations of Hamilton men. Later, when Hamilton goes upstairs to say goodnight to Roger, the boy wants to know if his grandfather was strong too (204), and whether his father loved his own father more than he loves him. It is obvious that this experience has made a profound impression on Roger, that he now

feels placed in a male lineage, and feels the loneliness inherent in this when he asks:

Dad? You'll think I'm pretty crazy, but I wish I'd known you when you were little. I mean, about as old as I am right now. I don't know how to say it, but I'm lonesome about it. It's like--it's like I miss you already if I think about it now. (205)

There is a poignancy to the boy's desire to know his father on equal terms that transcends the situation. It speaks of the boy's glimpse of the knowledge of the kinds of things which a man might find himself doing in spite of his better self, and the understanding that this stands between them now. The lesson young Roger Hamilton has learned is profoundly ambiguous<sup>17</sup>--on the one hand he has been told that violence is bad and should not be used to resolve conflicts unless all alternatives have been exhausted, and yet on the other hand he is proud that his father is so strong and can handle himself in a situation like this one, and he hopes that he will grow up to be this strong himself. In the early stories, of which "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets," is an example, the inheritance of the children is something about which they feel

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<sup>17</sup> The lesson that Gary Berman has learned is harder to figure out. We never find out whether he lied to his father to get him to back him up at the kitchen-table tribunal, or whether he told his father the truth and they decided to act in their own best interests (i.e. so that they would not be liable for paying any damages for the bike) rather than in the interests of the truth. In any case, Gary Berman watches his father attempt to impose his will over a group of other adults, and sees him take a beating for his troubles. Mr. Berman was not able to back up his tough talk. The reader's imagination of the conversation which might occur between Gary Berman and his father on their way home provides an interesting counter-balance to the one between Roger and Evan Hamilton.

deeply ambivalent, although in this case the negative aspects of what has happened seem to have been mainly cancelled out by the son's overwhelming love for his father. In the later stories the children's inheritance seems to be skewed more to the negative side of the ambivalence-equation, as expressed in a poem such as "The Schooldesk," where the father laments for his "grown-up son and daughter / [who] took one long look at me / and tried to make all my mistakes" (*Ultramarine* 93).

In "My Father's Life," Carver's autobiographical essay first published in *Esquire* in September 1984, we can observe all the motifs of family life in the fictional landscape of the Carver chronotope.<sup>18</sup> There is, for instance, the sense of placelessness inherent in the lives of those who have had their lives at least partly determined by economic forces beyond their control--Carver's father came west to Washington state from his native Arkansas in 1934, not to pursue a dream but "simply looking for steady work at decent pay" (*Fires* 13). The story of the courtship and marriage of Carver's parents is as lacking in romance as that of his father's journey to the west--his mother met his father "on the sidewalk as he came out of a tavern." In her own words: "He was drunk. . . . I don't know why I let him talk to me. His eyes were glittery. I wish I'd had a crystal ball. . . . [He] always had a

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<sup>18</sup> Graham Clarke observes that the brevity of this essay is itself significant: "In a culture where autobiography and biography are acknowledged as major genres, Carver not only reduces the terms of his father's life, he gives to the account a quietism which borders on silence. There can be no celebration. All that we have is a condition, which through the sparsely given details, achieves an extraordinary complexity and resonance" (102-03).



girlfriend, even after we were married" (14). After his father had been out west awhile the whole family came out, and even though the father was there first it did not take long before "everybody was better off" than him (15). According to Carver's mother, his father "couldn't keep money . . . money burned a hole in his pocket. He was always doing for others."

The father's various proclivities--adultery, alcoholism and foolishness with money--helped to create a home environment in which violence was perhaps inevitable. The mother once "found someone else's tube of lipstick on the floorboard" (16) of their car, and referred to this woman as a "floozy" in her son's presence. It almost certainly would have been after such a discovery that the following episode occurred:

I can recall what happened one night when my dad came home late to find that my mother had locked all the doors on him from the inside. He was drunk, and we could feel the house shudder as he rattled the door. When he'd managed to force open a window, she hit him between the eyes with a colander and knocked him out. We could see him down there on the grass. For years afterwards, I used to pick up this colander--it was as heavy as a rolling pin--and imagine what it would feel like to be hit in the head with something like that. (15)

The situation, in which the boy is "protected" by one parent against the invasion of their home by the other, is one which

would be very confusing to his sense of loyalty. In the boy's fascination with the colander and what it would feel like to be hit with such a thing we might discern both rejection and identification with the father, as well as a fearful desire to one day experience such things for himself.<sup>19</sup>

Not all of the confrontations between Carver's parents took the form of dramatic violence: Carver also recalls witnessing incidents which were much more subtle and insidious:

I remember my mother pouring his whiskey down the sink. Sometimes she'd pour it all out and sometimes, if she was afraid of getting caught, she'd only pour half of it out and then add water to the rest. . . .

Once I saw her take a pan of warm water into the bedroom where my dad was sleeping. She took his hand from under the covers and held it in the water. I stood in the doorway and watched. I wanted to know what was going on. This would make him talk in his sleep, she told me. There were things she needed to know, things she was sure he was keeping from her.

(16)

There were many secrets in this household, and the relations and loyalties between the three members who are accounted for here were very complex.<sup>20</sup> There is a lot of sneaking around. In this

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<sup>19</sup> That the adult Raymond Carver did experience such things is confessed to in the "*Paris Review* Interview": "Let's just say, on occasion, the police were involved and emergency rooms and courtrooms" (Simpson and Buzbee 38).

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that Carver's brother does not appear in the essay at all, and very rarely in the poems. One in which Carver's brother does appear,

instance Raymond acts as a voyeur, passively watching his mother subject his father to this truth-test rather than attempting to wake his father in order to try and save him from her treachery. In this case he accepts or perhaps identifies with his mother's need to know more about his father's secret life.

This episode recalls another water-trick, as described in the poem "Suspenders," from the collection, *A New Path to the Waterfall*. In the poem a mother and her son are arguing over whether or not the son will wear suspenders to school the next day. The father lies "in the bed that took up most of the room in the cabin" (40). He asks them to "be quiet" and for a glass of water:

I went to the sink and, I don't know why, brought him  
a glass of soapy dishwater. He drank it and said, That sure  
tasted funny, son. Where'd this water come from?

Out of the sink, I said.

I thought you loved your dad, Mom said.

I do, I do, I said, and went over to the sink and dipped a  
glass into the soapy water and drank off two glasses just  
to show them. I love Dad, I said.

Still, I thought I was going to be sick then and there.

What could possibly motivate a son to pull such a nasty little trick on his poor hungover father? The son vehemently defends his assertion that he does indeed love his father, and yet when asked

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"Drinking While Driving" (*Fires* 53), would seem to indicate that they shared some of the same behavioral inclinations.

to help quench the thirst brought on by "all that whiskey [his father] drank," he deliberately tries to make his father feel even worse than he did already.

The boy wants to punish his father, but why? Is it because the father seems so weak and pathetic lying on the bed in the middle of the day? Or is it that he feels strongly about his father's drinking? In either case, the boy's punishment of his father mirrors the unjust punishment his mother is inflicting on him: "Nobody wore suspenders to second grade, / or any other grade for that matter." Perhaps the son, whether he consciously realizes it or not, wants to punish his father for not taking care of him properly--for not making sure there was enough money for a new belt for him. The despair inherent in such a family is captured at the end of the poem, where their yelling is interrupted by pounding "on the wall of the cabin next to [theirs]" (41). Ashamed at having their quarrel overheard by the neighbors, they "turned out the lights and / got into [their] beds and became quiet. The quiet that comes to a house / where nobody can sleep." Their family's lack of financial stability leaves them all feeling exposed to outside criticism, and, as a consequence, none of them feel secure enough to sleep soundly.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> That Carver associates shame with a lack of money is made clear in "My Father's Life," when he relates how, because his family was one of the last to get indoor plumbing, he denied acknowledging which home was his to a teacher: ". . . our toilet was the last outdoor one in the neighborhood. I remember the shame I felt when my third-grade teacher, Mr. Wise, drove me home from school one day. I asked him to stop at the house just before ours, claiming I lived there" (*Fires* 15).

Carver writes about a son's ambivalence towards his father in another, earlier poem, "Bobber" (*Fires* 16), where the speaker recalls winter fishing trips with his father and his father's friend when he was a boy:

My dad kept his maggots alive and warm  
 under his lower lip. Mr. Lindgren didn't drink.  
 I liked him better than my dad for a time.  
 He let me steer his car, teased me  
 about my name "Junior," and said  
 one day I'd grow into a fine man, remember  
 all this, and fish with my own son.  
 But my dad was right. I mean  
 he kept silent and looked into the river,  
 worked his tongue, like a thought, behind the bait.

The boy finds Mr. Lindgren's conventionality very attractive, compared to his father's status as a bit of an oddball. That Mr. Lindgren does not drink marks a fundamental difference between the two older men. Mr. Lindgren is full of the kind of platitudes which the boy wants to hear from his father--all that stuff about fishing as an activity which connects generations of men. The father, on the other hand, simply attends to the business of fishing in complete silence. The last three lines of the poem hinge on the adversative connective "but," and seem to represent an evaluation of the event remembered contemporary with the writing of the poem rather than with the event itself. Now, after many years, the speaker realizes his father was "right." But what does "right" mean

in this context? Perhaps we are to understand the speaker of the poem as judging his youthful preference for Mr. Lindgren over his own father as naive, or as thoughtless. Maybe the speaker now realizes that the glib, fatherly platitudes of Mr. Lindgren were not "right" for him, that the connections made between generations of men in his family are much darker than those of Mr. Lindgren's ilk. An idea of fate hangs over this poem, as if the speaker realizes that he is indeed his father's son, and that any aspirations which he ever might have had to be anything other than this were futile. In his essay "Raymond Carver: Our Stephen Crane," Russell Banks states that:

. . . the work of both men is powered by the dramatization of a painful argument with a ferocious, inescapable determinism that, when at last it overpowers its characters, approaches tragedy. Crane's determinism is more Darwinian, perhaps, and his argument with it more romantically male and adolescent, than Carver's, in which fate seems locked onto the life-shaping power of the domestic mundane, the mess and grind of ordinary life, and Carver's argument against it is driven by love. (101)

What Banks has to say about Carver's work in general can help us to understand this particular poem. Looking back, the speaker of the poem recognizes that, in spite of his boyhood longings, it was determined that he would become more like the man his father was than the genial Mr. Lindgren. There is, in the speaker's

mature appraisal, an appreciation for how his father has born up under the weight of his own determined existence, an appreciation "driven by love."

Returning to the essay "My Father's Life," we can again note Carver's ambivalent feelings in his description of his father's nervous breakdown and "the years when he couldn't work and just sat around the house trying to figure out what next and what he'd done wrong in his life that he'd wound up like this" (*Fires* 18). By this time Carver is married and has a young family of his own to which he must devote most of his attention. But his new family has already started to take on some of the patterns and attributes of the family he grew up in, and his father's condition must on some level represent a sort of fate for himself. In the essay Carver shows a deep-seated need to understand his father which is manifested in an attempt to identify with him, as the young Roger Hamilton does in "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets." After his father's death, Carver kept his photograph as a young man up on a wall. He studied this photograph carefully, "trying to figure out some things about [his] dad, and maybe [himself] in the process" (20). But the knowledge he sought did not come easily, instead his father "just kept moving further and further away from [him] and back into time." Much later, long after the photograph was lost in one of his all too frequent moves, Carver reconstructed the photograph from memory in the poem, "Photograph of My Father in His Twenty-Second Year":

*October.* Here in this dank, unfamiliar kitchen  
 I study my father's embarrassed young man's face.  
 Sheepish grin, he holds in one hand a string  
 of spiny yellow perch, in the other  
 a bottle of Carlsberg beer.

In jeans and flannel shirt, he leans  
 against the front fender of a 1934 Ford.  
 He would like to pose brave and hearty for his posterity,  
 wear his old hat cocked over his ear.  
 All his life my father wanted to be bold.

But the eyes give him away, and the hands  
 that limply offer the string of dead perch  
 and the bottle of beer. Father, I love you,  
 yet how can I say thank you, I who can't hold my liquor  
     either  
 and don't even know the places to fish? (*Fires 59*).

At this point Carver was in possession of his full paternal inheritance--he was a full-blown alcoholic with a dysfunctional family of his own making, he identified with the resignation and weakness he remembered seeing in his father's eyes in the photograph, they were as his own. He understood the desire to be bold, to deny the idea of a fate, to transcend the limitations which upbringing and socio-economic environment place on a person; and yet he also felt the gravity of this fatalism pulling him back to



the condition he "deserved," to the place he "belonged." Carver's feelings toward his father are always marked by a powerful ambivalence, but nowhere is this clearer than when he admits that his love for his father must be tempered by regret that they should be so much alike in their weaknesses. It does not require a huge leap of the imagination to see how, in the light of the autobiographical material which Carver provides us, we can understand Carver's fiction in one sense as a working-through of his complicated and conflicted feelings toward his father.

Although there is no companion-essay to "My Father's Life" in which Carver addresses his relationship to his mother, it is my opinion that it was only a matter of time--that if Carver had lived long enough to outlive his mother he would have surely produced such a piece. There is plenty of evidence in the stories and poems to suggest that Carver found relations between mothers and sons to be every bit as problematic as those with fathers. The one story from the first collection which explicitly confronts the issues surrounding the relationship between a mother and her son is "Why, Honey?" This story, uniquely among Carver's work, takes the form of a letter, written by a mother in response to inquiries made about her son's upbringing. This woman's son left home at an early age and is in the present of the story a famous politician, the governor of a state. The main problem in trying to understand this story is deciding whether or not to believe this woman's account of her son's upbringing as the gospel truth. In a first reading one tends to allow oneself to be taken in by the sheer

insistence of the mother's voice, and by the pathos inherent in the story she narrates. But upon subsequent readings, and further meditation, various inconsistencies catch the careful reader's attention, broaching the possibility that the mother is not an altogether reliable narrator, or perhaps even that she may be out of her mind. However, it is difficult to overcome the empathy for the mother which her narrative inspires in a first reading (one has to risk, if only figuratively, becoming as bad a son as she makes her own out to be to overcome this empathy), and it is no surprise that two out of three readers of this story fail to overcome this resistance. Both Arthur M. Saltzman (*Understanding Raymond Carver* 58-59) and Ewing Campbell (*Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction* 23-25) take the narrator completely at her word in their readings of "Why, Honey?"; the former pausing only to draw some rather superficial connection between the mother and characters in other stories from the same collection, and the latter only to collect evidence to support his thesis of a narratological progression in Carver's fiction.<sup>22</sup> Of all the published accounts of the story, only Runyon's (in *Reading Raymond Carver* 58-65) thoroughly explores the ambiguities of the mother's narrative to see what they might suggest.

The mother in "Why, Honey?" has raised her son by herself, and this fact alone plays a major role in ensuring that our

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<sup>22</sup> "The story provides an excellent example of Carver's shift from the Joycean stories of 'Pastoral' and 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?' to stories based on the unseen, but felt patterns of Hemingway's fiction, as seen, for example, in Hemingway's 'Out of Season'" (Campbell 24).

sympathies go out to her, at least in the first instance. And there can be no doubt that at least some of her complaints about her son must be true. He is without a doubt a habitual liar, specifically, the kind of person who lies even when there is no apparent need for a lie, even where a lie would brook no profit, however defined. The corroborated evidence she provides concerning the amount of his paychecks or his whereabouts on a particular occasion ensure that the reader believe at least this (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 169).

And yet it eventually becomes apparent that we cannot take all of her assertions at face value. Her first, and probably most damning accusation is the torture and death of the family cat. But the only evidence linking her son with the disappearance of Trudy is the fact that the next door neighbor, Mr. Cooper, saw a boy he "thought" was her son running toward the house (168). As Runyon points out, Mr. Cooper did not get "a good enough look to know for sure" whether or not the boy he saw was indeed her son (61). And then when the mother tells her son about Trudy she says "he acted surprised and shocked" (169), not that he *was* surprised and shocked. Looking back over this first incident in the chain of events she describes, it is apparent in her choice of verbs that she had already shown herself willing to believe her neighbor's vague description rather than her son's emotional response. Her feelings about this initial incident have been affected by everything that follows, although none of it is any more certain than this. All the

evidence which she brings to bear against her son, beyond some relatively inconsequential lies, is circumstantial.

The flipside of the sympathy the mother receives as a single parent is a recognition that "such a family situation can lead to some strained behavior on both sides. Husbandless, such a mother would naturally tend to cling to her son in a perhaps obsessive way" (Runyon 61).<sup>23</sup> The trouble between this mother and her son began, after all, when the boy was "about fifteen" (Carver 168), an age when it is not unusual for teenagers of either sex to start behaving a little strangely, especially if their home environment has been a stressful one. We can only presume, because she does say that "It" started then, and I can think of no reason to distort this, that up until this point the boy had been well-behaved. He had always been "an excellent student" (170), and his nocturnal activities seem to have had no negative effect on his grades. The mother comes across to the reader as a worrier and a fusspot, someone who has always put pressure on her son to live up to his status as "the man of the house" (169). The intrusive mothering style of this woman would inevitably result in resentment on the part of a son who was inclined to rebelliousness. The mother obviously believed that she had a right to intrude into every area of her son's life--she had found out that he was lying about how much money he made at work by going through his pockets, and

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<sup>23</sup> Although I agree with the gist of this sentence, I would place the word "naturally" in brackets or under erasure. However, I do not think that Runyon intends to imply any sweeping generalization about what is "natural" here, he is just using the word in one of its casual usages.

later she described how she poked around in his car after he stayed out one Saturday night:

On the Sunday right after I tiptoed into his room for his car keys. He had promised to pick up some breakfast items on his way home from work the night before and I thought he might have left the things in his car. I saw his new shoes sitting half under his bed and covered with mud and sand. He opened his eyes.  
(170-71)

Instead of asking her son about the breakfast items directly, she asks about the shoes, and then when he is in the shower she returns for the keys and searches his car. She finds "a shirt of his rolled in a ball and . . . full of blood" (171). She rejects his explanation as to how the shirt got like this, choosing instead to see the bloody shirt as further evidence of her son's evil nature. Two nights later she hears her son get home:

I heard his car pull up out front and I listened as he put the key in the lock and he came through the kitchen and down the hall to his room and he shut the door after him. I got up. I could see light under his door, I knocked and pushed on the door and said would you like a hot cup of tea, honey, I can't sleep. He was bent over by the dresser and slammed a drawer and turned on me, get out he screamed, get out of here, I'm sick of you spying he screamed. I went to my

room and cried myself to sleep. He broke my heart  
that night. (171-72)

Certainly these are terrible words for any child to speak to his or her mother, and yet, as Runyon points out, this outburst might also represent "a cry from the heart that many a teenager pestered by an interfering parent could readily understand" (62). The reader's sympathies are divided between a mother whose obsessive concern for her son strikes one as nearly pathological, and a son who does not seem to take his mother's feelings into account.

Although the ambiguities inherent in the unreliability of the narrative in "Why, Honey?" would seem to make an authoritative reading of the story virtually impossible, something can be gained by supplementing our reading of the story with glimpses of the mother which Carver affords us in his more autobiographical writings. Surely the image of the mother sticking her sleeping husband's hand in the pan of warm water in order to conduct a surreptitious interrogation of his unconscious mind ("My Father's Life," *Fires* 16) resonates in the sneakiness of the mother's approach to her son in "Why, Honey?" The mother is often represented as a "meddling, tiresome woman who torments her son" (Runyon 60) in the poems, and in two poems from *Ultramarine* this is especially evident. In "What Can I Do", the mother uses the phone as a weapon for inflicting bad feelings on her son: "My mother wants / to talk to me too. Wants to remind me again how it was / back then. All the milk I drank, cradled in

her arms. / That ought to be worth something now" (63). In "Where the Groceries Went," a similar scenario is enacted:

". . . Honey, I'm afraid.  
I'm afraid of everything. Help me, please.  
Then you can go back to whatever it was  
you were doing. Whatever  
it was that was so important  
I had to take the trouble  
to bring you into this world." (62)

Clearly the mother represented in these two poems is perceived by her son as a guilt-inducing monster,<sup>24</sup> a clinging weak creature who requires constant attention in order to believe that she is loved. The vague fears of the mother in "Where the Groceries Went" remind us of the paranoia of the politician's mother in "Why, Honey?" She writes, at the end of her letter: "Last week I saw a car on the street with a man inside I know was watching me, I came straight back and locked the door. A few days ago the phone rang and rang, I was lying down. I picked up the receiver but there was nothing there" (174). Does she really have any more grounds for believing that her son is searching for her in order to do her harm than she ever did for believing the worst about his boyhood bad behavior, or is this a woman who suffers from a borderline personality disorder? It would seem that she is quite

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<sup>24</sup> The morning after the son in "Why, Honey" broke his mother's heart, she says to him: "I promised myself I wouldn't bring it up and I'm not trying to make you feel guilty. . ." (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 172). Such passive-aggressive strategies can be extremely frustrating.

deluded--interpreting a strange car on the street and an aborted phone call as evidence of a plot against her could be interpreted as a paranoid response to what are, in essence, quite benign, everyday occurrences. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Carver's own mother possessed qualities like this. That she remained married to an adulterous alcoholic for thirty years would seem to indicate that she was a textbook enabler, one who allows one or more significant others to act out their self-destructive tendencies, and manages to thrive paradoxically under such conditions. The mother in "Why, Honey?" seems to be such a person, one who inspires others to act towards her in ways which will confirm her pathological view of herself and the world.

Hidden beneath the surface of the text of "Why, Honey?" is the latent narrative of the son. It is interesting to consider what he might say about the events which his mother relates in the story. One possible direction his narrative might go would be a variation of the old family romance theme, in which the child fantasizes that he is not really the offspring of the person or persons who pose as his parent(s), that he is actually the child of a much more exalted person. It does not require an overly active imagination to see the son in "Why, Honey," this intelligent, articulate and incredibly ambitious young man, as being embarrassed by the thought that this meddling, tiresome and anxious old woman is his mother. By cutting himself off from his origins, and the weight of a family history which would allow his mother to control him through guilt, the son is able to create



himself in an image which he chooses for himself. Among the stories in which family relations are specifically addressed, "Why, Honey?" is the only one in which a child is granted such freedom, and it is certainly interesting to note how most readers interpret this casting off of the yoke of determinism as cruelty towards the mother. Perhaps such cruelty is precisely the price one must pay in order to overcome the limits of one's upbringing in a world that is, for the most part, as heavily determined as the one which Carver's characters inhabit.

Carver wrote no more stories which specifically address a child's relationship with his mother appear until the final collection, *Where I'm Calling From*, and both which appear there concern the adult sons of aging mothers. In *Menudo*, a story which concerns a male protagonist, Hughes, who stays up all night trying to come to grips with "events in a life characterized by avoidance and a compulsive appetite for personal disaster" (Campbell 75), the idea of guilt is most clearly shown in a scene where "the narrator does penance, poking away at some guilt left from a bit of stinginess that his mother's sudden death made it impossible for him to reconcile" (Facknitz 70). The whole story concerns the penance which Hughes inflicts upon himself as the result of his latest adultery being discovered by his girlfriend's husband, and as a part of his penance he re-visits earlier periods in his life for which he still holds unresolved feelings of guilt.

Ostensibly the son's feelings of guilt toward his mother are to be understood as deriving from his failure to respond to her

request for a new clock-radio. Hughes had been sending his mother money for years--first monthly, and then larger sums twice yearly: "I gave her money on her birthday, and I gave her money at Christmas. I thought: I won't have to worry about forgetting her birthday, and I won't have to worry about sending her a Christmas present. I won't have to worry, period" (*Where I'm Calling From* 344). Obviously, Hughes is a man determined to eliminate as much worry from his life as possible. His motivation for sending his mother money twice a year rather than every month is thus selfish--it is easier and more convenient. The new arrangement "went like clockwork for a long time" before she asked him, "in between money times . . . for a radio." That the mother has in her old age regressed to a certain childishness is suggested in the way she hints to her son about her need for the radio. The situation also suggests that the mother is somewhat childlike in her incapability of adjusting her budget to allow such an inexpensive purchase. In any case, Hughes responds negatively to her hints about the radio: "I said to her over the phone that I couldn't afford any radios. I said it in a letter too, so she'd be sure and understand. *I can't afford any radios*, is what I wrote. I can't do any more . . . than I'm doing." But, of course, this is not true. Hughes easily could have afforded the "Forty dollars or less, including tax," which it would have cost him to buy the radio and have it sent to her. So why did he not do this? According to Hughes, it "seemed there was a principle involved." And then his

mother goes and dies before he can determine whether she even knew which principle it was she was violating with her request.

In "Menudo" we are witness to the aftermath of a whole life spent trying to avoid feeling guilt or responsibility for any of the bad things which have occurred in this life. We can only assume that Hughes' own upbringing was as chaotic and cruel as the life he has lived as an adult, and that his motivation for wanting to teach his mother a lesson was a gesture of payback for all the harsh lessons he had to learn as a child. Just as it is possible to read "Why, Honey?" as an anti-family romance, it is possible to read "Menudo" as a variety of enactment fantasy, where the author gets to imagine his mother's death in order to grieve for her. Why it would be necessary for Carver to imagine his mother dead in order to express his feelings of guilt and resentment toward her is made at least partly comprehensible by a close reading of the story "Boxes." In this story a son's life is complicated by the demands which his mother makes upon him, mainly having to do with her inability to be satisfied with her own life, as it is manifested in any of the various places where she chooses to live: "Other people take vacations in the summer, but my mother moves" (*Where I'm Calling From* 308). The mother is a character drawn from that class of people central to Carver's fiction--one of the disenfranchised, rootless, economic and spiritual migrants who are always on the move in search of an elusive and ill-defined somewhere or something better:

She started moving years ago, after my dad lost his job. When that happened, when he was laid off, they sold their home, as if this were what they should do, and went to where they thought things would be better. But things weren't any better there, either. . . . They kept moving, lightening their load with each move they made. A couple of times they landed in a town where I lived. They'd move in with my wife and me for a while and then they'd move on again. They were like migrating animals . . . except there was no pattern to their movement. . . . Then my dad died, and I thought my mother would stop moving and stay in one place for a while. But she didn't. She kept moving. (308-09)

The pattern of movement without reason is a feature of American life. These people dearly need someone to tell them where they should be and what they should do, but they lack faith in any authority and fiercely defend their right to make their own mistakes. This behavior has an autobiographical basis in Carver's life--his parents did move frequently after his father lost his job, and his mother continued to move around after her husband's death. In an interview with Penelope Moffet in 1988, Carver admits that although the mother-character in "Boxes": "is not really my mother . . . there are certain characteristics I guess the character shares with my mother. I'm not writing autobiography,

but there are certain reference points, real lines and real ropes that are going out from the story to the real world" (241).<sup>25</sup>

In the poem "Son," which describes a situation similar to the one narrated in "Boxes" (and keeping in mind once again that Carver's poetry is generally thought to be more directly autobiographical than his fiction), we can observe how the son feels as if his mother holds him at least partly responsible for her chronic unhappiness:

All night long, in my sleep, trying  
 to find a place where my mother could live  
 and be happy. *If you want me to lose my mind,*  
 the voice says *okay. Otherwise,*  
*get me out of here!* I'm the one to blame  
 for moving her to this town she hates.  
 Putting those neighbors she hates so close.  
 Buying the furniture she hates.  
*Why didn't you give me money, instead, and let me spend*  
*it?*  
*I want to go back to California,* the voice says.  
*I'll die if I stay here. Do you want me to die?*

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<sup>25</sup> That these reference points are quite tangible in this instance is made clear by Tess Gallagher in the introduction to *Carver Country*: "'Boxes' was patterned on the peripatetic movement of Ray's mother, who came, on one of her many moves, to live in Port Angeles near us for a year. During the time I was with Ray he usually spent a couple of months a year in concern over his mother's next move. Her way of installing hopefulness was periodically to shed her surround. These relocations inadvertently guaranteed that she would have the attention and resources of her two sons for a concentrated two-month period each year" (14). I would only question how "inadvertent" this strategy could be, given the portrayal of the mother in Carver's fiction and autobiographical writings.

There's no answer to this, or to anything else  
in the world this morning. The phone rings  
and rings. I can't go near it for fear  
of hearing my name once more. The same name  
my father answered to for 53 years.

Before going to his reward. (*Ultramarine* 68)

The fear that the speaker of the poem experiences when he thinks of the voice that the phone carries latent in its ring highlights his attempt to avoid a confrontation with his mother, who blames him for as much of her unhappiness as he will allow her to. We can hear the same terrible passivity which we have heard in the voices of so many other Carver characters in the voice of the mother, who accepts her fate as completely determined by the decisions and subsequent actions of others. It never seems to occur to her that it is up to her to make her own happiness wherever she is, that happiness is not waiting around the corner, pre-paid and shrink-wrapped, for her to pick up. Her son has no confidence in her ability to make decisions for herself--he buys her furniture rather than giving her the money to buy it for herself because he does not trust her judgement or even believe that she will do what she says she will with the money if he were to just give it to her. The whining, pleading tone of the mother's voice finds its apotheosis in the question: "Do you want me to die?" The son's reply, that "There's no answer to this," is what makes the mother's death in "Menudo" an enactment fantasy. At this juncture the speaker of this poem might very well want his

mother dead-- in fact, at this precise moment one might argue that the sum of this man's aspirations are to never hear her voice again. The guilt which this woman is capable of inflicting with her voice is unbearable to him. The speaker identifies with his namesake, his father,<sup>26</sup> who only received his release from the voice of this woman as the (ironic) reward for his death.

The speaker of the poem "Son" might very well be the same person as the first-person narrator of "Boxes." The mother in both instances is portrayed as a creature who feeds on guilt. The narrator's live-in girlfriend, Jill, is able to recognize this more clearly than is he. When the mother acts "as if it were [his] fault she'd moved here and [his] fault she'd found everything so disagreeable . . . calling [him] up and telling [him] how crummy the place was" (*Where I'm Calling From* 307), Jill tells him that she is laying "guilt trips" on him. The mother even tries to make her son feel guilty for having someone like Jill in his life:

It's fair to say that my mother sees Jill as an intruder. As far as she's concerned, Jill is just another girl in a series of girls who have appeared in my life since my wife left me. Someone, to her mind, likely to take away affection, attention, maybe even some money that might otherwise come to her. (306)

The mother is very greedy and small-hearted--because she does not have enough love or good will to stretch very far she assumes

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<sup>26</sup> Carver's father was also a Raymond. Raymond Carver was known as "Junior" amongst family.

that this is how it is for everyone else too. In her mind, human relations operate as a sort of zero-sum economy, so any love her son affords Jill is love she feels is stolen from her. The fact that Jill and the mother "hug each other when they say hello or good-bye" merely indicates their mutual adherence to an empty social form, it does not indicate any real feelings between them.

Most of "Boxes" concerns one last supper which the narrator, his mother and Jill share before another move. Jill uses the occasion to try and make the mother understand how he behavior makes her son feel:

"I wish you could have been happier here," Jill says. "I wish you'd been able to stick it out or something. You know what? Your son is worried sick about you."

"Jill," I say.

But she gives her head a little shake and goes on. "Sometimes he can't sleep over it. He wakes up sometimes in the night and says, 'I can't sleep. I'm thinking about my mother.' There," she says and looks at me. "I've said it. But it was on my mind."

"How do you think I must feel?" my mother says. Then she says, "Other women my age can be happy. Why can't I be like other women? All I want is a house and a town to live in that will make me happy. That isn't a crime, is it? I hope not. I hope I'm not asking too much out of life." She puts her cup on the



floor next to her chair and waits for Jill to tell her she isn't asking for too much. But Jill doesn't say anything, and in a minute my mother begins to outline her plans to be happy. (312)

The mother shows herself utterly incapable of understanding any perspective other than her own: Jill might as well be talking to the wall. The mother refuses to admit any awareness of how her demands on her son are affecting him, immediately turning from Jill's suggestion that she consider her son's feelings to a discussion of her feelings and her rights and her expectations of the vaguely-defined happiness which she seeks. It is clear that this woman will never be satisfied with what she can have, and will never take any responsibility for her own happiness. She seems to confuse the constitution's right to the pursuit of happiness with a cradle to grave guarantee of happiness. In the Emersonian terms which Frank Lentricchia uses in a discussion of Don DeLillo's novel *Libra*, the mother portrayed here is a consumer of dreams--she desires to transform herself from first-person consciousness to become a "universal third-person" (432), capable of the happiness of being a new self in a new world. The self she dreams of becoming is not very much different than who she is now, just a little happier. One of those "other" women.

But her son knows she will never be happy or content. She dislikes people, and it is difficult to be happy if that is how you are. He realizes that she will remain incapable of empathy for him, that she will continue in the same way that she always has until

she simply cannot do it any more. And he will do what he has done all along--he will "worry for her" (*Where I'm Calling From* 313). She is, after all is said and done, "all the family [he has] left."<sup>27</sup>

### C. Relations Between Parents and Children

The portrayal of children in Carver's fiction would seem to indicate that his attitudes towards his own children are no less complicated or conflicted than those he holds towards his father and mother. In the essay "Fires," Carver states that "the single greatest influence on [his] life" (*Fires* 31), and consequently on his writing, was his two children, and that, furthermore, their influence was largely "heavy and often baleful. . . ." Words such as negative, "oppressive and often malevolent" (28) are also used to describe his children's influence on his life. Listen closely to Carver's description of the "ferocious years of parenting":

The time came and went when everything my wife and I held sacred, or considered worthy of respect, every spiritual value,<sup>28</sup> crumbled away. Something terrible had happened to us. It was something that we had never seen occur in any other

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<sup>27</sup> In the PBS biography entitled "To Write and Keep Kind," Carver's mother relates how she was so angry after reading "Boxes" that she threw the book across the room.

<sup>28</sup> ". . . a belief that if we worked hard and tried to do the right things, the right things would happen" (33).

family. We couldn't fully comprehend what had happened. It was erosion, and we couldn't stop it. Somehow, when we weren't looking, the children had gotten into the driver's seat. As crazy as it sounds now, they held the reins, and the whip. We simply could not have anticipated anything like what was happening to us. (34)

The extent to which Carver casts Maryann and himself in the role of victims here is frightening to contemplate. The passivity of the verb construction and the vagueness of the noun as agency ("Something terrible had happened to us"), the degree to which Carver is able to objectify their plight, all of this taken together profoundly unsettles the reader. This is not the kind of thing we are used to hearing about families. Carver defines himself and Maryann as victims of their children, who are forces beyond their control, and yet, on an ultimate level, they are absolutely responsible for the very existence of these people. There is something very disturbing about the implications of Carver's tirade against his children here-- his depiction of them as demon-seed (he even blames them for his not being able to write in longer forms) strikes the reader as remarkable.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In the poem "Cheers," Carver refers to "my son, that bastard" (*Fires* 70). The son is guilty of being one of those people whom the paranoid, alcoholic speaker of the poem must: ". . . remain on guard, ever / more careful, more watchful, / against those who would sin against me, / against those who would steal vodka, / against those who would do me harm." In the poem "Not Far From Here," Carver refers to his daughter as "a long-haired brat" (*Fires* 91). She, also, is guilty of wanting something from him.

In most of the stories of the first collection children are portrayed relatively benignly--they are ignored and have their heads messed up a bit by their parents' ambiguity when it comes to life-lessons, but for the most part they are not treated too poorly. However, there is one story from the first collection, "Jerry and Molly and Sam,"<sup>30</sup> in which the children are represented as a burden and an obligation, and which forms the start of a trend in the representation of children in Carver's subsequent fiction. Al, the husband and father in this story, is a man with a lot of problems, and his "decision to do away with Suzy, the family dog . . . represents an effort to concentrate his complaints to a scale he can accomodate" (Saltzman 56). In fact, the first two pages of the story consist of no more than a litany of his problems:

Nothing was going right lately. He had enough to contend with without having to worry about a stinking dog. They were laying off at Aerojet when they should be hiring. . . . He was no safer than anyone else even though he'd been there two years going on three. He got along with the right people, all right, but seniority or friendship, either one, didn't mean a damn these days. If your number was up, that was that. . . . (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 151)

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<sup>30</sup> This is one of the stories which Robert Altman adapts for his film, *Short Cuts*. In his adaptation Altman turns Al from a factory worker into a policeman and money becomes a non-issue in the household--Betty's sister is a successful artist and the wife of a doctor in the film.

Immediately we are plunged into the largest of all possible contexts for Al's unease--the death of God being a virtual given in all of Carver's work--that he is an insignificant part of a huge economic enterprise, a worker in a factory which is itself only a part of an immense military-industrial complex. His life as an economic entity is determined by forces far beyond his control--the system periodically adjusts itself in order to attain maximum efficiency (and profits for shareholders) without concern for the effects which these adjustments may have on employees. It is no wonder that Al has a fatalistic attitude.

From this point Al adds to this context other problematic aspects of his life. He blame his wife, Betty, for talking him into moving into a "cushy two-hundred-a-month place" (152). Al tries to convince himself that their upward-striving was all her doing--he "hadn't really wanted to leave the other place. He had been comfortable enough." Clearly a lot of Al's anger is really directed towards himself--now, in hindsight, he cannot believe that he ever allowed himself to feel secure enough in his position at work to move to a more expensive place. He blames himself for not being able to know "that two weeks after [they'd moved] they'd start laying off." And on top of this all is the relationship which Al has going with Jill, a lonely girl he had picked up one night "when he was feeling depressed and jittery with all the talk of layoffs just beginning." This "thing" (what Al call the relationship at first) has turned into an *affair* (the emphasis is his) which he neither wants to continue nor to end. Al feels he is drifting, "losing control

over everything." He suffers from constipation and notices a bald spot in the mirror.

The litany of woes thus far is accomplished with a tone of helplessness and despair. The tone shifts to anger when Al thinks of his sister-in-law, Sandy, who gave them the dog:

That bitch! She was always turning up with some shit or other that wound up costing him money, some little flimflam that went haywire after a day or two and *had* to be repaired, something the kids could scream over and fight over and beat the shit out of each other about. God! And then turning right around to touch him, through *Betty*, for twenty-five bucks. The mere thought of all the twenty-five- or fifty-buck checks, and the one just a few months ago for eighty-five to make her car payment--her *car* payment, for god's sake, when he didn't even know if he was going to have a roof over his head--made him want to *kill* the goddamn dog. (153)

The dog becomes for Al the locus of all his negative feelings about the powerlessness he is experiencing in virtually every aspect of his life. The project of doing away with the dog takes on symbolic significance--it represents "the first step toward setting his house in order" (154).

Apart from its origin as a gift from Sandy, who Al obviously has a problem with, the dog is guilty of being a sneak: "The moment the back door was left open and everyone gone, she'd pry

open the screen, comethrough to the living room, and urinate on the carpet."<sup>31</sup> She has chewed away the crotch out of all of their underwear, "through the antenna wires on the outside of the house," and destroyed a pair of Al's good shoes. That the dog and the children are somehow connected as problems in Al's and Betty's lives is suggested in the following paragraph:

Betty tolerated the dog at greater durations, would go along apparently unruffled for a time, but suddenly she would come upon it, with fists clenched, call it a bastard, a bitch, shriek at the kids about keeping it out of their room, the living room, etc. Betty was that way with the children, too. She could go along with them just so far, let them get away with just so much, and then she would turn on them savagely and slap their faces, screaming, "Stop it! Stop it! I can't stand any more of it!" (154-55)

Both the dog and the children are separate, willful creatures, which cannot be controlled, even if they are dependent on Al and Betty for many things. In this family, it appears that the children have "gotten into the driver's seat," to return to the metaphor

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<sup>31</sup>Sneakiness is just one of a many negative qualities assigned to children in Carver's fiction. In "Feathers," from *Cathedral*, the kid that comes along nine months after Jack and Fran's memorable night out with Bud and Fran and their ugly baby, and which changes their lives for the worse, "has a conniving streak in him" (26). The alienation from himself and his wife which these changes have brought about in Jack's life are apparent in the way he describes it all as being "like something that happened to other people, not something that could have happened to us" (25). In his essay "The Possibility of Resurrection," Nelson Hathcock argues that Jack draws the narrative "from memory as a defense against ignorance" (34), that his story "becomes a weapon to combat feelings of powerlessness."

which Carver uses in the essay, "Fires." But to get rid of the problem which these children constitute is much more difficult than to get rid of a dog, so the dog must go.

Jack abandons the dog in their old neighborhood, just across the county line, so that if it is picked up and taken to the pound it will be in another jurisdiction, and therefore not traceable to him. On the way there he tries to convince himself that what he is doing is best for the dog, which will find a new home in a "large old two-story house . . . with happy, well-behaved, reasonable children" (157), a better home than he can provide. After pushing Suzy out of the car near "a large empty field" (158), Al speeds off. He stops at a bar, and finds that he does not "feel exactly unburdened or relieved" (159). He knocks back four beers and tries to pick up "a girl in a turtleneck sweater . . . [who sits] down beside him."<sup>32</sup> When it becomes apparent that this flirtation is going nowhere, he stops "at a liquor store [to buy] a pint of whiskey" (160) on his way over to Jill's. After a short and squalid interlude there (she squeezes blackheads from the side of his nose (161)), Al returns to a home that is "all tears, confusion" (162).

Confronted with the combination of his daughter's grief, his wife's grim resolve ("Turning to him with her hands on her hips") and his son's callous disregard ("Can we have a monkey, Daddy, instead of a dog?"), Al locks himself in the bathroom. In the

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<sup>32</sup> This is the "Molly" of the title. Jerry is the bartender and Sam is Al's boyhood dog (see Runyon 64).



mirror he sees: "his face doughy, characterless<sup>33</sup>--*immoral*, that was the word. . . . *I believe I have made the gravest mistake this time. I believe I have made the greatest mistake of all*" (163-64). Suddenly, Betty's resolve breaks, and she lets out her feelings about the situation:

"Is everybody going crazy?" she said. "I don't know what's going to happen to us. I'm ready for a nervous breakdown. I'm ready to lose my mind. What's going to happen to the kids if I lose my mind?" She slumped against the draining board, her face crumpled, tears rolling off her cheeks. "You don't love them anyway! You never have. It isn't the dog I'm worried about. It's us! It's us! I know you don't love me any more--goddamn you!--but you don't even love the kids!" (164)

The truth of Betty's accusation strikes to the core of Al's being--he is not willing to admit that he is a man who does not love his family, who secretly wishes he could abandon his children like he has the family dog, although all of the attitudes he has shown in the narrative up until this point would indicate that this is precisely the kind of man he is. Now it becomes imperative that he get the dog back to prove to Betty and Alex and Mary that he

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<sup>33</sup> Al is, like the man who looks like nobody in "The Father" (discussed in the previous chapter), afraid that he is nobody. The narrative reinforces this by implying that he is, in essence, nothing but a nexus of relations with others: "Sandy! Betty and Alex and Mary! Jill! And Suzy the goddamn dog! This was Al" (153).

does love them and does want to keep his family together, and to save his own soul in the process:

He saw his whole life a ruin from here on in. If he lived another fifty years--hardly likely--he felt he'd never get over it, abandoning the dog. He felt he was finished if he didn't find the dog. A man who would get rid of a little dog wasn't worth a damn. That kind of man would do anything, would stop at nothing. (165)

In effect, Al chooses to step back from the edge of an abyss: he sees the possibility for freedom from conventional morality as too evil and dizzying to choose. Al is still a sentimentalist at heart. When he gets close to where he suspects Suzy is, "tears spring to his eyes" (166). When Al approaches her:

They looked at each other. She moved her tail in greeting. She lay down with her head between her front legs and regarded him. He waited. She got up. She went around the fence and out of sight.

He sat there. He thought he didn't feel so bad, all things considered. The world was full of dogs. There were dogs and there were dogs. Some dogs you just couldn't do anything with. (167)

Does Al now leave the dog for the boy who has already adopted her, or does he follow her and claim her as his own? Has this experience helped Al to clarify his thoughts and feelings about his life and the people he shares it with? Can he now separate the

aggressive feelings he has towards his children from those he has towards Suzy? Or does his life remain as he thought of it before: "a maze, one lie overlaid upon another until he was not sure he could untangle them if he had to"? (154) The narrative does not make clear what course of action Al will take now at this crucial juncture in his life--though we are left with the feeling that he has learned something, even if this something must remain as vague as his understanding of his limitations and his capacity for evil would indicate.

Although the attitudes which parents display towards their children in the early stories of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* certainly do not reflect the utopian expectations which a middle-class American readership is usually thought to possess, they are still remarkably benign compared to what follows in the stories of Carver's middle period. One factor which plays an important role in the changes in the depiction of parent-child relationships between the early and middle stories is the seriousness of the drinking which occurs in the stories. Even though many of the characters in the stories of the first collection are drinkers, few of them seem to be actual alcoholics. As the incidence of alcoholic characters in the collections of the middle period increases, the attitudes of parents towards their children become truly ugly and bestial. One story which stands out as a depiction of virtually everything that could possibly go wrong in a family is "Where Is Everyone?", from *Fires*. This story "was first published in the journal *TriQuarterly* in the spring of 1980. It reappeared under

the title 'Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit,' in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). In the transition it was reduced by a third, Carver having cut from it the same sort of material that he excised in the second publication of 'So Much Water So Close to Home'" (Meyer 246).<sup>34</sup> I will concentrate my analysis on the longer text, "Where Is Everyone?", as it was published in *Fires*, because in its greater willingness to reveal itself it provides much more information about the characters and their relationships than the almost schematic "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit."

"Where Is Everyone?" starts with a deadpan utterance from the first-person narrator: "I've seen some things" (173), and then goes on to define the context of madness in which these "things" occurred:

. . . during those days, when my mother was putting out to men she'd just met, I was out of work, drinking, and crazy. My kids were crazy, and my wife was crazy and having a "thing" with an unemployed aerospace engineer she'd met at AA. He was crazy too. His name was Ross and he had five or six kids. He walked with a limp from a gunshot wound his first wife had given him. He didn't have a wife now; he wanted my wife. I don't know what we were all thinking in those days.

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<sup>34</sup> The exact nature of the differences between "Where Is Everyone?" and "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit" are discussed in Adam Meyer's essay, "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism" (246-49); in Marc Chenetier's essay, "Living On/Off the 'Reserve': Performance, Interrogation, and Negativity in the Works of Raymond Carver" (179); and in Runyon (90-93).

All the ingredients of the family home as madhouse are again present--a lack of money,<sup>35</sup> adultery, alcoholism, hatred and violence. Especially violence. Although the narrator wishes Ross well, at the time of the events he narrates he had threatened his life repeatedly (173). The narrator's relations with his teenaged son, Mike, are also marked by violence: "One afternoon I screamed and got into a scuffle with my son. Cynthia had to break it up when I threatened to knock him to pieces. I said I would kill him. I said, 'I'll kill you and not bat an eye'" (175). Mike, in turn, takes his frustrations out on his mother:

Cynthia came home at seven o'clock one morning [after she'd stayed over night at Ross' house] to get dressed for school and found that Mike had locked all the doors and windows and wouldn't let her in the house. She stood outside his window and begged him to let her in--please, please, so she could dress and go to school, for if she lost her job what then? Where would he be? Where would any of us be then? He said, "You don't live here any more. Why should I let you in?"

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<sup>35</sup> When the narrator talks with his wife it is usually about "business, survival, the bottom line of things. Money. Where is the money going to come from? The telephone was on the way out, the lights and gas threatened" (177). Although there is not enough of anything (love, respect, esteem) to go around in this household, the bottom line is money. The daughter, Kate, tells her father that her mother has bailed Ross out of jail --he is "in and out of court, or in jail, every six months or so for not meeting his support payments" (173)--not out of any sense of loyalty for her father, but because "there was a serious cash-flow problem in the house and if money went to Ross, there'd be that much less for what she needed" (174).

That's what he said to her, standing behind his window, his face all stopped up with rage. . . .

[Eventually] he let her in and she swore at him. Like that, he punched her hard on the shoulders several times--whop, whop, whop--then hit her on top of the head and generally worked her over. Finally she was able to change clothes, fix her face, and rush off to school. (176)

In this scene we can observe a variation on "My Father's Life," where it is the mother who locks the father out on suspicion of adultery, and then knocks him out with a colander when he finally gets in. In that instance the son seemed to identify with the father, and was fascinated by the idea of being hit over the head with a heavy object as was his father. In "Where Is Everyone?" it is not clear whether the son's motivations are Oedipal--that he is jealous of his mother's involvement with Ross --or whether he is standing up for his father's interest in the affair. This is possible, even if the strongest feelings the son has for his father are hatred and contempt. In this kind of family no member is free from guilt or shame, all are implicated in the sordidness of their situation.

And yet Cynthia refuses to believe that Mike is "a dangerous character" (178). Both Ross and the narrator think Mike should "join the army, navy, or the coast guard" in order to "learn respect and manners," but Cynthia thinks that Mike is just going through "a phase that would soon pass." It is apparent from the context

that the narrator believes that his wife is deluded with regard to her ideas about the boy, that his behavior represents something much more serious than just a phase. In the poem, "On an Old Photograph of My Son" (*A New Path to the Waterfall*), the speaker sees in his son's smirk "the contemptuous expression of the wise guy, / the petty tyrant" (86), and the image itself still has such a capacity to inspire such fear and confusion in the speaker that its mere sight fills him with "despair and anger" (87). On the other hand, the speaker knows that the boy's mother would have another reaction entirely:

. . . Your youth and  
 beauty, that's all she'll see and exclaim over.  
 My handsome son, she'll say. My boy wonder.  
 She'll study the picture, searching for her likeness  
 in the features, and mine. (She'll find them, too.)  
 Maybe she'll weep, if there are any tears left  
 Maybe--who knows?--she'll even wish for those days  
 back again! Who knows anything anymore?

Why is it that the father has such a difficult time forgiving his son? While the son's behavior was unarguably bad, it did occur within a context which must be taken into account in any humane assessment. Must not the father take some responsibility for the creation of that context? It seems that the father exists in a state of bad faith--he does not want to admit that his memory of his son as a teenager sets his "teeth on edge" and makes him "feel like reaching for a drink" (87) precisely because in remembering his

son he is also forced to remember who he was at that time, and to acknowledge a responsibility and a trust toward his son which he, as an alcoholic, was unable to fulfill.<sup>36</sup>

The passivity of the narrator and his willingness to blame his situation for the condition of his life connect "Where Is Everyone?" to the autobiographical voice of the essay "Fires," where Carver complains that his life was ruined because his children were in control. In an act of outrageous bad faith,<sup>37</sup> the

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<sup>36</sup> The conciliatory tone of the fourth stanza is too slight to balance the hatred and anger which the speaker expresses towards his son in the first three: ". . . don't / worry, my boy--the pages turn, my son. We all / do better in the future" (88). Beyond the acknowledgement of paternity inherent in the two possessive pronouns here, these lines strike the reader as more of a formal, poetic gesture than of a movement towards a deeply felt reconciliation and sense of forgiveness for what has passed between them. As an example of what the slightness of the fourth stanza cannot balance, in the second stanza the speaker slips into the voice of his son, providing the narration for a typical mother-son confrontation which can be placed beside the scene enacted between Cynthia and Mike referred to earlier:

What's for supper, mother dear? Snap to!  
 Hey, old lady, jump, why don't you? Speak  
 when spoken to. I think I'll put you in  
 a headlock to see how you like it. I like  
 it. I want to keep you on  
 your toes. Dance for me now. Go ahead,  
 bag, dance. I'll show you a step or two.  
 Let me twist your arm. Beg me to stop, beg me  
 to be nice. Want a black eye? You got it! (86)

The son's use of the imperative, and his desire to express power over his mother, is reminiscent of the scene from "Why, Honey?" where the son turns on his mother to answer the question which the title of the story asks: ". . . I'll show you. Kneel is what I say, kneel down is what I say . . . that's the first reason why" (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 173). The father's hatred of the son in "Where Is Everyone" and "On an Old Photograph of My Son" is confused with a deep sense of self-hatred--he sees in his son's treatment of his wife behavior which reminds him of his own, possibly even ones which he had expressed towards his own mother as well as his wife. The father/husband's perceptions of the situation are distorted by his own sense of guilt, and in choosing to repress the memory of his own misbehavior he makes it impossible for him to truly forgive his son.

<sup>37</sup> I am using this term as Sartre defines it in *Being and Nothingness*: "In bad faith there is no cynical lie nor knowing preparation for deceitful concepts. But the first act of bad faith is to flee what it cannot flee, to flee what it is. The very



narrator of "Where Is Everyone?" implies that his children have manipulated the atmosphere of the household in order to achieve the optimum conditions for their inherent wickedness to thrive:

The kids, Katy and Mike, were only too happy to take advantage of this crumbling situation. They seemed to thrive on the threats and bullying they inflicted on each other and on us--the violence and dismay, the general bedlam . . . they saw craziness on every side, and it suited their purpose, I was convinced. They fattened on it. They liked being able to call the shots, having the upper hand while we bungled along letting them work on our guilt. They might have been inconvenienced from time to time, but they ran things their way. They weren't embarrassed or put out by any of the activities that went on in our house either. To the contrary. It gave them something to talk about with their friends. I've heard them regaling their pals with the most frightful stories, howling with laughter as they spilled out the lurid details of what was happening to me and their mother. Except for being financially dependent on Cynthia, who still somehow had a teaching job and a monthly paycheck, they flat-out ran the show. (175-76)

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project of flight reveals to bad faith an inner disintegration in the heart of being, and it is this disintegration which bad faith wishes to be" (70).

Every sentence in this account of this family's situation should be challenged. That these children could be construed as "happy" in any way is plainly absurd. And surely "thriving" is the wrong word to describe what they are doing here--showing the human capability of adapting to just about any horrible situation, if only for a limited time. And as for "their purpose;" it is as if the narrator sees his children as being put on earth merely to destroy him, a conceptualization of the situation which betrays the self-pitying narcissism of the alcoholic. The narrator describes his children as an opportunistic virus, but only addresses in passing ("they saw craziness on every side") the fact that the parents have brought about the conditions to which such a virus must adapt for survival. The children merely imitate the craziness they see on every side, they do not initiate it, and they are forced to take some measure of control for their situation because their parents are too consumed by their own problems to exert any control over the life of the family. The children are only guilty of being resilient, and of learning to speak the language of hate, guilt and degradation too well. They are not "embarrassed" by the situation because to them this is family life, far more real to them than the depictions of family life which they might glean from the television set.

That the children are able to transform the squalor of their home-life into low comedy indicates their determination to make the best out of a bad situation, that most American of virtues. And that the narrator of "Where Is Everyone?" should imply that his

children should be embarrassed to treat the material of their family life as they do strikes the reader as perhaps the fundamental irony at the core of the Carver's chronotope, given that the writer standing behind the narrator trades in precisely this kind of harrowing comic-honesty in the literary marketplace. Carver does not discuss the implications of his famed "honesty" for his children in any of his autobiographical works. But Maryann Carver does recall how when "*Fires* came out . . . one of [her] son's professors was so concerned for him, knowing him to be a hardworking student and affable person, that he took Vance to lunch and tried to comfort him and explain what poetic license was all about" (Halpert 101). Talking about life in the Carver household at the time in which the atmosphere there corresponded closely to that depicted in "Where Is Everyone?", Douglas Unger recalls how Vance

. . . was very emotionally wounded by the tremendous disarray in their lives. . . . Vance was really caught between. He had to finish high school, his parents were alcoholics, and his home had been yanked out from under him. He was a physically big young man, like his Dad, and at times became violent with Maryann and Ray. He was so frustrated. He didn't really know what to do. (61)

Just as with "Why, Honey?", there is a plausible, implicit parallel narrative to "Where Is Everyone?", one voiced by the children. In it they would not be nearly so happy about being "in control" as

the father suggests they are in his story--in fact, it is safe to assume that they yearn for a coherent sense of authority in their lives, some force to guide their development along a path leading somewhere other than their parents' dead end. They too have "seen some things," but surely their take on the events related in "Where Is Everyone?" would differ substantially, and perhaps essentially, from their father's self-pitying account. Of course, neither version of this story is included in *Where I'm Calling From*.<sup>38</sup>

Most of the fathers in Carver's fiction, like Carver himself, belong to that last generation of men to come into their majority before the onset of the sexual revolution unleashed by the pill in the early 1960s. These men were raised to bind sex inevitably to marriage and children. It was their destiny to marry young and then sit on the sidelines and watch as their slightly younger peers enjoyed the relative freedom of the sexual marketplace of the 1960s and 1970s. In the story, "Tell the Women We're Going,"<sup>39</sup> from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, one of two best friends, Jerry, gets "married before the end of the first semester" (58) of his senior year of high school. The other friend, Bill, remarks at his own wedding, a few years later, "how much older Jerry looked, a lot older than twenty-two" (59). The

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<sup>38</sup> More evidence of the autobiographical basis of "Where Is Everyone?" can be found in the narrator's description of his father's death (*Fires* 180-81), which corresponds very closely to the sequence of events in the essay "My Father's Life" (19).

<sup>39</sup> Of all the stories which Robert Altman adapts for his film *Short Cuts*, this is the one which seems to be played closest to its authorial intentions.

narrative implies that the responsibilities of family life accelerate aging, and that marriage and children are a burden and a constraint on a man's freedom: "When Bill and Linda and Jerry and Carol got together, it was always at Jerry's place because Jerry had the barbecue and the records and too many kids to drag around." With marriage and children comes a kind of stability which can in another light appear as a weight--the children are represented as just another thing, like the barbecue and the records, to be dragged around. Over time Bill notices changes in his pal: "Jerry was getting to be deep, the way he stared all the time and hardly did any talking at all." One day the two men are out driving, after knocking back "five cans of beer" (61) each at the pool hall, when something in Jerry snaps. He becomes obsessed with two girls on bicycles who they see on the road. They become for him something he must have--"Bitches" (62), "cunt" (64), "cockteasers" (65):

Bill had just wanted to fuck. Or even to see them naked. On the other hand, it was okay with him if it didn't work out.

He never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock. Jerry used the same rock on both girls, first on the girl called Sharon and then on the other one that was supposed to be Bill's. (66)

As one of Carver's most minimal fictions, "Tell the Women We're Going" does not provide us with enough background information

to make any interpretation of Jerry's violence seem reasonable.<sup>40</sup> However, it is clear that Jerry feels utterly oppressed by his marriage and his children, those things which constitute for him a bad fate, and his brutal slaying of the two innocent girls might be read as violence displaced from his family. In killing the two girls, Jerry frees himself of his obligation to his family, only to land himself in a prison of a literal kind.

The banal double murder in "Tell the Women We're Going" is the only act of violence of this magnitude which in Carver's fiction. Most of the violence is confined to the family: its inhabitants take out their frustrations on each other rather than on some random third-person. The family found in the story "One More Thing," which operates as a kind of awful coda to the second collection, following as it does upon the more expansive and paradoxically upbeat story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,"<sup>41</sup> is closely related to the ones portrayed in "Where Is Everyone?" and "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit." The family in "One More Thing" is also well down the road to disintegration: "L.D.'s wife, Maxine, told him to get out the night she came home from work and found L.D. drunk again and being abusive to Rae, their fifteen year old" (155). L.D. is an alcoholic, presumably unemployed. "He had gone to college" (158), but any economic or social advantage this might

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<sup>40</sup> Arthur M. Saltzman agrees that the violence at the end of "Tell the Women We're Going" is quite inexplicable, at least within the context of the story: "Whether Jerry's act is premeditated or out of what half-sense of vengeance it originates, Bill 'never knew,' nor does he surmise his own motives for being there" (112).

<sup>41</sup> If only in comparison to the other stories in the collection.

have been expected to produce was either unrealized or squandered. In making that part of his life which exists outside of the home a complete failure he has also abrogated all rights to respect within the home. His daughter has not "been to school for weeks," and claims that no one in the house has the authority to "make her go" (156). So instead L.D. and Rae have been sitting around the house and arguing about the idea of control. Rae believes that the "brain is the most powerful organ in the body" (156), and that its power can be harnessed in order to overcome virtually any problem. L.D., on the other hand, thinks the stuff Rae culls from sitting "around all day reading astrology magazines" (155) is crazy. He prefers to think that biology is destiny, that the loss of control is not just "in his head" (156).

Recriminations as to who exactly is "nuts" fly back and forth between these two. After Maxine tells L.D. to leave, he digs in his heels for one last stand: "L.D. had no intention of going anywhere. He looked from Maxine to the jar of pickles that had been on the table since lunch. He picked up the jar and pitched it through the kitchen window" (157). L.D. relents only when Maxine tells Rae to call the police: "All right, I'm going right now. . . . It suits me to a tee. You're nuts here anyway. This is a nuthouse. There's another life out there. Believe me, this is no picnic, this nuthouse." Maxine reminds him that the fact that she is "paying the rent" gives her the right to tell him to leave, and that if their home is a nuthouse it is because L.D. made it that way (159). This last statement stops L.D. dead in his tracks: it is precisely what he has been hiding

from, the idea of taking some measure of responsibility for the person he has become. He has been drinking to anaesthetize himself, to dull the nagging voice of a conscience which might suggest to him that he has given up on his life too easily, failed as father and husband. He stops on his way out the door, wanting "to say one more thing," something which would absolve him of responsibility for his family and justify his actions: "But then he could not think what it could possibly be." L.D.'s inability to articulate a response to Maxine indicates the degree to which he is lost. This is a man who can no longer even attempt to explain his life except by hoisting the blame on others. When Maxine characterizes recent events as "another tragedy in a long line of low-rent tragedies" (156), she coins a phrase that could be used to describe the majority of Carver's stories concerning family life.

Another aspect of family life which Carver deals with is the aftermath of failed marriage--separation and divorce--and the effects this has on children. "Popular Mechanics"<sup>42</sup> is, at about two pages, the shortest story in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, a minimalist fiction which in its brevity approaches parable, like "The Father" in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* All readers of "Popular Mechanics" agree that "Carver seems to be retelling and altering the story of Solomon and the two mothers . . . to highlight a disconcerting fact of contemporary culture" (German and Bedell 259), but "Carver provides no Solomon to arbitrate between his two battling, embattled parents" (Saltzman

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<sup>42</sup> A version of this story is published as "Mine," in *Furious Seasons* (1977).



95). In "Popular Mechanics," the orderly separation of a young couple turns into an impromptu custody dispute. The husband is packing his things in a suitcase when the wife notices "the baby's picture on the bed and [picks] it up" (123). The logic of the narrative would seem to imply that the mother's taking custody of the photograph of the baby makes the father decide to take the baby itself. Sensing the tension in the air, the baby starts to cry. The mother holds

. . . the baby over in a corner behind the stove.

But he came up. He reached across the stove and tightened his hands on the baby.

Let go of him, he said.

Get away, get away! she cried.

The baby was red-faced and screaming. In the scuffle they knocked down a flowerpot that hung behind the stove.

He crowded her into the wall then, trying to break her grip. He held onto the baby and pushed with all his weight.

Let go of him, he said.

Don't, she said. You're hurting the baby, she said.

I'm not hurting the baby, he said.

The kitchen window gave no light. In the near-dark he worked on her fisted fingers with one hand and with the other hand he gripped the screaming baby up under an arm near the shoulder.

She felt her fingers being forced open. She felt the baby going from her.

No! she screamed just as her hands came loose.

She would have it, this baby. She grabbed for the baby's other arm. She caught the baby around the wrist and leaned back.

But he would not let go. He felt the baby slipping out of his hands and he pulled back very hard.

In this manner, the issue was decided. (124-25)

As German and Bedell point out, "here the baby's welfare is not the 'issue'" (259). The baby becomes an object which each parent is determined to have precisely because the other wants it so badly. Saltzman suggests that "surrendering custody would be a symbolic admission of blame that neither parent can afford to shoulder" (95). Both father and mother are determined to take something away from the ruins of their marriage, and the baby is the thing which will prove to the world that he or she is the better, more caring parent. The absolute selfishness of their motivation is conveyed without editorial comment, strictly through the terrifying objectivity of the narrative. The gruesome pun of the final line ("issue" as both argument and offspring) emphasizes narrative distance. "The grim conclusion, the breaking or dislocating of the baby's arm, occurs in the reader's mind, after some thought" (German and Bedell 258).

In "A Serious Talk," the children are also used as pawns by their separated parents in order to get at each other. Burt returns

to his house on "the day after Christmas" (*What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* 105). Practically the first thing he sees when he pulls up the driveway is "the pie he'd dropped the night before. It was still there, the aluminum pan upside down, a halo of pumpkin filling on the pavement." He remembers how grateful he was to his son the night before for "backing him up" (106) emotionally during the ritual exchange of gifts. But after the exchange, Burt realizes that his presence is now superfluous-- everyone is preparing for the arrival of "her [Vera's] friend and his children" (105). In mute protest for his exclusion from the reconstituted family, Burt puts all five of the "small wax and sawdust" (106) logs sitting "ready on the hearth" into the fireplace, stacks "all six [of the pies lined up on the sideboard in his arms], one for every ten times she had ever betrayed him" (107). Burt has ostensibly returned to the house to apologize to Vera and the kids for the disturbance he had created the night before, but the children are out and as soon as he sits down Vera starts to dredge up memories of other ruined holiday dinners:

"Do you remember Thanksgiving?" she said. "I said then that was the last holiday you were going to wreck for us.<sup>43</sup> Eating bacon and eggs instead of turkey at ten o'clock at night."

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<sup>43</sup> In the "Paris Review Interview," Carver talks about the origins of this story: "The fiction I'm most interested in has lines of reference to the real world. None of my stories really *happened*, of course. But there's always something, some element, something said to me or that I witnessed, that may be the starting place. Here's an example: 'That's the last Christmas you'll ever ruin for us!' I was drunk when I heard that, but I remembered it. And later, much later, when I was sober, using only that one line and other things I imagined,

"I know it," he said. "I said I'm sorry."

"Sorry isn't good enough." (108)

Burt's comeupance is a cliché, but one which in this instance represents a deep truth about certain kinds of behavior. Neither Burt nor Vera are blameless for the situation they have created. After all these two have been through, and despite Burt's desire to say "grieving things, consoling things" (111) to Vera, he cannot in the end control his destructive impulses. He saws through the phone cord with a carving knife when Vera goes to take a call from her boyfriend in the bedroom. When Vera realizes why the phone has gone dead, she orders Burt out of the house and tells him she is going to get a restraining order. Burt's thoughts on the way out reveal his confusion: "He was not certain, but he thought he had proved something. He hoped he had made something clear" (112-13). Burt and Vera's reliance on clichés for both communication and introspection reveals the degree to which they are both lost in the chaos of their lives. Neither can see clearly into their problems, cannot figure out how they should act towards each other. Therefore they fall into patterns of conflict

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imagined so accurately that they *could* have happened, I made a story. . . ." (Simpson and Buzbee 41). It seems clear that some of Carver's stories "happened" more than others. In fact, Douglas Unger goes on record as saying that he "can think of only two or three stories [Carver] wrote that were not in some way based on incidents in his own life or in his own family" (Halpert 57). That the atmosphere of a story like "A Serious Talk" might represent a fairly accurate depiction of the atmosphere of a Carver family Christmas is suggested in a comparison with the aftermath of the holiday described in the poem "From the East, Light" (*Ultramarine* 48-49), where the father sleeps on the couch amidst the wreckage of the holiday, the Christmas tree "turned over . . . on its side in front of the fireplace," and the children are left to fend for themselves.

which are pre-determined social forms. And their children grow up as witnesses to the chaos.

With the exception of "Fever," the stories found in *Cathedral* continue to develop the counter-mythology of family life along lines charted in the earlier collections. In "Chef's House," an alcoholic couple get together after a period of separation in order to dry out together in a house which a friend is letting them have "for almost nothing" (28). We might imagine this couple as the parents from "Where is Everyone?" a few years down the road. Now enjoying a brief interlude of peace and sobriety in the country, Edna and Wes both express regrets about how they raised their children: "Wes said he wished he could do it over again and do it right this time" (31). Edna tries to convince Wes that his children still love him in spite of everything he put them through, but he knows in his heart that they do not, that they have deliberately cut him out of their lives. They only communicate with their mother:

Our kids kept their distance. Cheryl lived with some people on a farm in Oregon. She looked after a herd of goats and sold the milk. She kept bees and put up jars of honey. She had her own life, and I didn't blame her. She didn't care one way or the other what her dad and I did so long as we didn't get her into it.  
(29)

No amount of regret on the part of the father can make up for what he did to them back then. By the time they come to "understand things . . . it won't matter" (31).

In another story from *Cathedral*, "The Compartment," we come upon a character who is related to the father in "Where is Everyone?" in some fundamental ways, and yet who is quite different in others. Myers, the father here, is of a distinctly higher socioeconomic class than the father in "Where is Everyone?"--he works at an engineering firm and can afford to stay in four-star hotels on a six-week European vacation. Myers is also not an alcoholic, at least at the time of the narration, although it is clear that this fact alone does not make him an entirely well-adjusted human being. Myers does not have many meaningful human connections: "It struck him that there was really no one, besides his secretary and a few business associates, that he felt it was necessary to tell he was going away" (51). As Arthur M. Saltzman observes: "His insularity is also documented by the meagerness of his leisure--he reads books on waterfowl decoys--as well as by his aspiration to live 'in an old house surrounded by a wall'" (132). What connects Myers to the father in "Where is Everyone?" is his attitude towards his son and relationship with him. Myers is going to visit his son in Strasbourg after not having "seen the boy in eight years. There had been no phone calls between them during this time, not even a postcard since Myers and the boy's mother had gone their separate ways" (*Cathedral* 47). And then, out of the blue, Myers had received a brief letter from his son in which he

told his father "that he'd been living in France and studying for the past year at the university in Strasbourg . . . no mention was made in the letter of the boy's mother--not a clue to her condition or whereabouts. But, inexplicably, the boy had closed the letter with the word *Love*, and Myers had pondered this for a long while" (51). Myers closes the letter in which he suggests to his son that they meet at the train station in Strasbourg with the same word. It seems clear that this word carries little real weight between these two, that it serves an awkward, rhetorical function rather than a truly expressive and emotional one.

Myers' feelings toward his son, profoundly ambivalent, tend towards the negative side of the balance. He blames his son in large part for the break-up of his marriage, believing that the boy exercised a "malign interference in their personal affairs" (47):

The last time Myers had seen his son, the boy had lunged for him during a violent quarrel. Myers's wife had been standing by the sideboard, dropping one dish of china after the other onto the dining-room floor. Then she'd gone onto the cups. "That's enough," Myers had said, and at that instant the boy charged him. Myers sidestepped and got him in a headlock while the boy wept and pummeled Myers on the back and kidneys. Myers had him, and while he had him, he made the most of it. He slammed him into the wall and threatened to kill him. He meant it. "I gave you life,"

Myers remembered himself shouting, "and I can take it back!"

Thinking about that horrible scene now, Myers shook his head as if it had happened to someone else. And it had. He was simply not that same person. (47-48)

Even without the complications of poverty and unemployment, characteristic of so many of the fathers in Carver's fiction, Myers seems to share with most of them the sense that the terrible aspects of their lives have been determined. He is willing to blame everyone but himself for what went wrong, and to defend his right to feel justified in the murderous rage he had felt then. His denial of even being the same person who was capable of uttering these hateful lines indicate a deeply divided sense of self, reminiscent of Carver's own feelings about the two separate lives he led, before and after drinking.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps alcohol had been a factor in Myers' life at the time of the break-up of his marriage.

On the train, when Myers thinks "of the meeting with his son . . . only a few hours away" (49), he is thrown into panic. He does not know if his limited understanding of the forms of social interaction, especially with regard to the gestures expected of a father seeing a son after a long separation, will see him through this situation:

How would he act when he saw his boy at the station?

Should he embrace him? He felt uncomfortable with

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<sup>44</sup> See footnote 3 in this chapter.



that prospect. Or should he merely offer his hand, smile as if these eight years had never occurred, and then pat the boy on the shoulder? Maybe the boy would say a few words--*I'm glad to see you--how was your trip?* And Myers would say--something. He really didn't know what he was going to say. (49-50)

There is no guidebook to which Myers can refer to discover the right course in this situation. He is truly in a foreign land, a world of emotions which he has consciously turned his back on all these years: "He knew if he let himself go on thinking about these things, his heart could break" (50). It is a revelation to the reader at this point that Myers might even consider himself as having a heart to break--he seems all ego and defences.

Myers' discovery, upon returning from the washroom, that "the gift he'd bought for the boy [an expensive Japanese wristwatch purchased at a shop in Rome]" (52) has been stolen provides him with just the excuse he has been looking for, just enough of a jolt to his sense of propriety to allow him to justify avoiding the meeting he has been dreading so much. After "ludicrously [trying] to intuit who the thief is" (Saltzman 133), Myers begins to see his situation as hopeless:

It came to him that he didn't want to see the boy after all. He was shocked by this realization and for a moment he felt diminished by the meanness of it. He shook his head. In a lifetime of foolish actions, this trip was possibly the most foolish thing he'd ever done. But

the fact was, he really had no desire to see this boy whose behavior had long ago isolated him from Myers's affection. He suddenly, and with great clarity, recalled the boy's face when he had lunged that time, and a wave of bitterness passed over Myers. This boy had devoured Myers's youth, had turned the young girl he had courted and wed into a nervous, alcoholic woman whom the boy alternately pitied and bullied. Why on earth, Myers asked himself, would he come all this way to see someone he disliked? He didn't want to shake the boy's hand, the hand of his enemy, nor have to clap him on the shoulder and make small-talk. He didn't want to have to ask him about his mother.

*(Cathedral 54-55)*

Clearly the eight years that have passed since the violent incident which marked Myers' separation from his wife and son have not been used to heal the wounds created then. Myers is in a deep state of denial--he acknowledges no responsibility for how his actions towards his wife might have eroded their relationship, instead choosing to cast his son as the scapegoat for all the vague forces which have determined his life. Although he may have had something to do with bringing his son into the world, this alone does not make him a father.

Myers' momentary feeling of diminution in the face of his decision connects him to the father in "Jerry and Molly and Sam," who came to see abandoning the family dog as an act which would

mar his humanity. Although we cannot be sure if Al recovers the dog in the end, there can be no doubt that Myers does abandon his son for a second time, leaving him standing on the railway platform. It is clear that Myers prefers the diminished existence he has created for himself after leaving his family to one in which he might actually have to acknowledge some responsibility for the failure of his marriage. Looking out the window, Myers is "afraid he'd see the boy's face at the glass. He didn't know what he'd do if that happened. He was afraid he might shake his fist" (55). Myers' gesture is reminiscent of one about which the narrator/father of "Where Is Everyone?" fantasizes: "I often imagined my own deathbed scene in those days . . . I would hope to have the strength to slap each of my kids and my last words for them would be what only a dying man would have the courage to utter" (*Fires* 175). At the core of both gestures is the fathers' desire to psychically annihilate their offspring in order that they might imagine an existence in which parts of themselves will not live on in their children. They fervently desire to avoid the moment of recognition which Carver describes in the poem "The Child":

Seeing the child again.  
 Not having seen him  
 for six months. His face  
 seems broader than last time.  
 Heavier. Almost coarse.  
 More like his father's now.  
 Devoid of mirth. The eyes

narrowed and without  
 expression. Don't expect  
 gentleness or pity

from this child, now or ever. (*Ultramarine* 129)

Here the father is forced to recognize that part of himself which lives on in his child, and to acknowledge that this is not necessarily the best part. Both Myers and the father in "Where Is Everyone?" are afraid of facing their sons as adults, because to do so might result in their having to acknowledge their part in the failure of their marriages and in the destruction of the women they had loved as younger men. Both these fathers have too much psychic capital invested in the status quo, where in their minds the children take almost total blame for the fate of the family, for them to be able to establish mature, adult relations with their children.

In one of his last stories, "Elephant," Carver explores the consequences of family disintegration for a father who does retain a sense of responsibility for his children. The father in "Elephant" appears to be the only member of his family who is gainfully employed, and as a result he must bear the burden of supporting them all. His brother has lost his job and needs money to "make the payment on his house" (*Where I'm Calling From* 351). Their mother gets a check, "every month, rain or shine" (352):

I was sorry about my brother's troubles. But I  
 had troubles of my own. In addition to my mother, I  
 had several other people on my payroll. I had a

former wife I was sending money to every month. I had to do that. I didn't want to, but the court said I had to. And I had a daughter with two kids in Bellingham, and I had to send her something every month. Her kids had to eat, didn't they? She was living with a swine who wouldn't even *look* for work, a guy who couldn't hold a job if they handed him one. (354)

And then there is his son:

After he graduated from high school, he packed his things, left his mother's house, and went to a college back East. A college in New Hampshire, of all places. Who's ever heard of New Hampshire? But he was the first kid in the family, on either side of the family, to even *want* to go to college, so everybody thought it was a good idea. I thought so, too, at first. How'd I know it was going to wind up costing me an arm and a leg? He borrowed left and right from the banks to keep himself going. He didn't want to have to work a job and go to school at the same time. . . . [After] he'd borrowed everything he could, everything in sight, including enough to finance a junior year in Germany, I had to begin sending him money, and a lot of it. When, finally, I said I couldn't send any more, he wrote back and said if that was the case, if that was really the way I felt, he was going to deal drugs or else rob a bank--whatever he had to do to get money to

live on. I'd be lucky if he wasn't shot or sent to prison.  
(355-56)

Perhaps in his moments of bitterest feeling he would consider himself lucky indeed if his son was shot in such an outlandish way, but in the end this father falls prey to the guilt trip his son lays on him and continues to send him money: "I had plenty on my conscience as it was" (356). For instance, in a dream the father remembers "kicking the window out of [his] son's car and threatening his life" (361).

The father does not make enough money to support all of these people without compromising his own lifestyle and financial position. He is, after all, only a blue-collar worker. Every now and then the pressure of supporting all of these people seems too much, and he threatens to stop:

Once in a while I'd get fed up with it and write letters to all of them, threatening to change my name and telling them I was going to quit my job. I'd tell them I was planning to move to Australia. . . .

But when it came right down to it, none of them really believed I'd go to Australia. They had me, and they knew it. They knew I was desperate, and they were sorry and they said so. But they counted on it all blowing over before the first of the month, when I had to sit down and make out the checks. (356)

Unlike so many of the other fathers in Carver's fiction, the narrator in "Elephant" acknowledges his responsibility for his

family, especially for his grown children, who, unlike his wife, have no legal claim on him. In fact, it might be argued that his support for his children far exceeds his obligation to them. The son, in particular, seems to be very deliberately manipulating his father through the projection of guilt:

My son wrote from New Hampshire that it was essential he go back to Europe. His life hung in the balance, he said. He was graduating at the end of summer session, but he couldn't stand to live in America a day longer after that. This was a materialist society, and he simply couldn't take it any more. (360)

The son's need for financial support is frivolous compared to his sister's, and the son does not recognize that his father has any needs at all. The son cannot see past his egotistical, romanticized view of his own life. And yet the father, in spite of everything, consciously decides to accept his burden: "When all was said and done, I decided things could be a lot worse" (363). He is determined to make the best of the situation, and to trust in luck to turn things around for the various members of his family. His determination is helped by a dream he has of his own father, one which precedes the dream where he threatens his son and drinks whiskey. In this dream the narrator rides on his father's shoulders:

. . . I became aware of the strong grip of his hands around my ankles. . . . I turned loose and held my arms out on either side of me. I kept them out there

like that for balance. My dad went on walking while I rode on his shoulders. I pretended he was an elephant.  
(361)

In his dream, the narrator re-lives a moment of connection with his own father, one which provides him with a glimpse of what it means to be a man and a father. This moment of connection works to validate all the sacrifices which he now makes on behalf of his family. The memory of his own father's strength sustains him.

"Elephant" is another story firmly grounded in the autobiographical reality of Carver's life. After Carver's writing started to catch on and make him some money in the 1980s, he became the elephant upon which his whole family wanted to ride. Tess Gallagher states, in the introduction to *Carver Country*, that: "At times the demands from all quarters by Ray's family for money reached such a pitch that he felt his connections with them had been reduced to this--the simple need for cash" (14).<sup>45</sup> In the

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<sup>45</sup> Although Tess Gallagher certainly possesses a keen, perhaps unsurpassed, insight into Raymond Carver's writing, and into the man he was in his "second" life, she does come across as a little harsh when it comes to any mention of Carver's family from his first marriage. Listen to the tone of accusation in this passage from the introduction to *Carver Country*: "The fact that he had gone on with his life and his writing and had managed to achieve some financial security was, sadly, not a clear good in terms of his family. He balanced the rewards of his success against resentment, accusation, and the easily tapped guilt from the years when his drinking had held him in thrall and had made it impossible for him to give of either means or self" (14). It is as if Gallagher sees it as part of her vocation to defend Carver against scrutiny concerning his relationship to his family. It also seems as if she accepts that Carver's alcoholism abrogates him of all responsibility for having been a less than perfect father to his children back then; whereas it seems to me that his children would be entirely justified in resenting not being able to reap the rewards of their father's success, given just how much of that success is derived from the fictional portrayal of situations which have their origins in the depiction of their failed family life.



poem "The Mail," we can observe scenarios concerning his son and daughter which would not seem out of place if included in "Elephant":

On my desk, a picture postcard from my son  
in Southern France. The Midi,  
he calls it. Blue skies. Beautiful houses  
loaded with begonias. Nevertheless  
he's going under, needs money fast.

Next to his card, a letter  
from my daughter telling me her old man,  
the speed freak, is tearing down  
a motorcycle in the living room.  
They're existing on oatmeal,  
she and her children. For God's sake,  
she could use some help. (*Ultramarine* 13)

But "The Mail" is not resolved as nicely as "Elephant"--it lacks the kind of epiphanic moment which we see in the image of the father lifting the boy onto his shoulders and carrying him, an image which Tess Gallagher says seems "to ameliorate a conjoining sense of burden, duty, and fractured love" (*Carver Country* 14). Instead, in "The Mail" the speaker walks "to the graveyard for some comfort." Whether this comfort is to be understood as deriving from the thought of an end to paternal obligation brought on by the death of his children or his own demise is left ambiguous.

In conclusion, the mythology of family life is absolutely central to the Carver chronotope. Tess Gallagher states that "What one might call the tyranny of family would have to be a main element in any characterization of Carver Country" (13). I would argue that the mythology of family life is the most important territorialization in Carver's fiction, that it is, in essence, the real setting for all that occurs in the Carver chronotope. Carver, like so many of his narrators, obsessively returns to his past "to dredge up some old sin of commission or omission and re-enact and re-evaluate it" (Banks 101). We can see "accommodation and spiritual progress" (Gallagher 14) in the sequence of Carver's stories about family life-- from the early stories of benign neglect and moral ambiguity on the part of parents who have barely reached adulthood themselves; through the fierce and ugly stories of the middle period, where the family is the site of utter madness and depravity; to the quiet benevolence and acceptance of responsibility for family by the father in "Elephant." Even given the abbreviated end which cancer put to his career as a writer, it is clear that Carver had worked through most of the resistance he had to honestly confronting the problems which surrounded his own upbringing and how this affected his own family. I have not intended to use autobiographical material to somehow undermine Carver's achievement, rather, I offer my analysis in the same spirit of terrible honesty which is the most enduring quality of his fiction. Carver was a profoundly troubled human being for much of his life, and his fiction bears witness to the innumerable people

who live such lives in contemporary America. Only discussion which does not attempt to hide or distort the truth for purposes of pride can lead to understanding.

#### D. Coda: Writer and Wife

As I suggested at the close of the second chapter, the Dostoevsky screenplay and "Errand" marked the opening of a new direction in Carver's writing which would have taken him out of what I am calling the Carver chronotope. Many readers of Carver take "Errand" to be his crowning achievement, his *Tempest*, his farewell to the world. But I see "Errand" as the beginning of a project leading only to unfulfilled potentialities, and favor the late story "Intimacy" as Carver's "last" story, the one which marks the furthest boundaries of the Carver chronotope.

"Intimacy" is a story about a mature writer returning to visit his first wife after not having "seen [her] in four years" (*Where I'm Calling From* 331). It is written in the first person, and to a reader even moderately familiar with the contours of the Carver biography, it is soon apparent that the story is about Ray and Maryann Carver. On the surface the story is an act of contrition by the writer, who has used many of "the low, shameful things" (333) that happened in the course of their twenty-year marriage as material for his writing.

In her contribution to "Glimpses: Raymond Carver," Maryann describes her sensitivity to her husband's portrayal of her in his writing:

I could accept the notoriety as long as Ray and I were together. . . . Later, after Ray became famous, I became supersensitive as to how I was depicted on the page. But now as I look back, I see Ray did not hesitate to portray himself either, in any position, humiliating or not. But he was a man and could get away with it better. He also had a voice. (Halpert 275-76)

As a famous American writer, Raymond Carver could talk about the bad old days in countless interviews. Carver was able to use his voice to make people believe his version of events, to make them respect the reformed sinner for the accomplishments of his second life. As Maryann rightly observes, Raymond Carver was also aided by his very maleness--men are generally allowed more leeway with regard to misbehavior in our culture, even when this misbehavior is hard on children. To some degree, "Intimacy" gives a voice to the spurned first wife, which she uses like a knife. She accuses him of making "her feel exposed and humiliated" (331), says he was always "comfortable with betrayal" and is "sick" and "crazy as a bedbug" (332). She now regrets their past intimacy ("We were so intimate I could puke"), says how he has "been hanging out with the wrong people" (333), does not "have any principles" and remembers "the wrong things." She calls

him a "ruthless, coldhearted son of a bitch" whose heart is "a jungle, a dark forest . . . a garbage pail" (334).

That Carver was all these things is apparent to anyone familiar with his autobiographical writing. In the poem, "The Author of Her Misfortune," the first-person speaker expresses a desire for a woman to stop "saying those things" about him (*Ultramarine* 51). He says "it'd be nice if she / could hold her tongue. Stop / hating me for being happy. / Blaming me for her life. I'm afraid / I'm mixed up in her mind / with someone else."<sup>46</sup> The extent of the self-pity expressed in these lines is hardly in keeping with the myth of "Saint Ray" which has been making the rounds since Carver's death.

In "Intimacy," the writer says regret "doesn't interest [him] much" (333), and others have remarked on Carver's rather underdeveloped sense of guilt. In the Carver chronotope, the writer can justify anything if it contributes somehow to the writing, for the writer is precisely that person for whom all other considerations are secondary. Carver's friend, William Kittredge, another hard-drinking writer in the bad old days, describes his version of this writerly ethos:

The thing I believed in was work, the stories,  
and if that was not worth doing, well then, there was  
no way to make good on anything, there was no

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<sup>46</sup> The speaker here seems convinced that the man this woman speaks so poorly about is an actual other person, and not just an earlier manifestation of himself. He deliberately confuses a metaphor (my two lives/my earlier self) for the literal truth in order to avoid having to take responsibility for even feeling badly about acts committed in the previous life.

justifying anything in your life. I had let myself believe that good writing was like a license to steal; anything was forgivable so long as you were writing well. (91)<sup>47</sup>

This is the ethos of the writer who aspires to communicate news about the kinds of worlds he has lived in, the things he has seen and the people he has known. But once experience is transformed into writing, the writer does not care about the living human beings who have served as subjects for his artistic rendering. The writer's only concern is with the morality of aesthetic form and construction, the artistic truth of the work itself. If the story "works" as a story, then it is justified.

The wife in "Intimacy" recognizes the absurdity inherent in her ex-husband's visit--that the great writer, celebrated far and wide for his honesty and integrity, his sympathy for the weak and the dispossessed, is there on "a fishing expedition . . . hunting for *material*" (333). He may get down on his knees and "take the hem of her dress" (335) in a gesture which resembles some form of supplication, but she recognizes that he still wants "something" from her (336). So she frees him by telling him to "just tell it like you have to . . . and forget the rest" (337). As Douglas Unger observes, the irony of this story is that the writer makes another story about his need to seek forgiveness for having allowed his

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<sup>47</sup> Kittredge continues: "Which is a line of bullshit a lot of people like me have used to excuse endless rudeness, selfishness, cruelty, and general cheapshit misconduct. It's a line so stupid and so demeaning I have to wonder if I believed it at the time."

ex-wife's life "to be so used and abused in his stories and by the world" (Halpert, "Glimpses" 297).

The writer walks off down the street, stepping through the autumn leaves which are "everywhere, even in the gutters" (337). He remarks: "Somebody ought to make an effort here. Somebody ought to get a rake and take care of this." As a human being, the writer has often understood the care he takes in literary composition and revision for a moral activity. He has functioned as a writing machine, programmed to do one thing and to do it well, to translate lived experience into literature. And yet here, in the closing movement of the Carver chronotope, we can recognize an acknowledgement on the part of the writer that he has been the person who has not taken up the rake and cleaned up the mess. The writer gestures towards a new stage in his career, one in which he will be able to move beyond his compulsive need to dwell on the ugly and unfortunate aspects of his first life. Unfortunately, Carver was barely allowed the time to begin this new stage.

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