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Sorting Out the American Dream
The Short Stories of Raymond Carver

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American Studies Honors Thesis
Professor Charles W. Bassett
Fall 1998 - Spring 1999
I wish to express grateful acknowledgment and appreciation to the following people, with whom this thesis would not have been possible. First, to my parents, Neil and Donna Williams, for their hard work, teachings, sacrifice, and constant support. To Professor Margaret T. McFadden, for all her help, knowledge, and ability to open my eyes to the great value of American Studies. Finally, I would like to thank Professor Charles W. Bassett, a mentor unlike any other and a legend in his own time, for his words, wisdom, and guidance.
Sorting out the American Dream
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The myth of the eighties was that the United States of America, the greatest power the world has known, economically and militarily, a society favored with material riches beyond measure and a political system whose freedoms made it the envy of every nation on earth, had fallen into a state of disintegration and with Ronald Reagan recaptured what it had lost: optimism; strength; enterprise; inventiveness. Most of all, America wanted to believe it had recaptured a sense of success. Success for the nation, success for the individual. In the public mind, the two were indivisible. (Johnson 13)

To many, the eighties were the “me decade,” a decade when the American public looked to its leaders for guidance, authority, and the means to national, but more importantly, individual success. Under Ronald Reagan, optimism, strength, enterprise, inventiveness, and most importantly, success, became words all Americans wanted to associate themselves with, and more importantly, words Reagan believed that everyone could and would associate themselves with (Johnson 13). On January 20, 1981, this passage was a part of the Inaugural Address of President Reagan. Consider this excerpt from the very beginning of the address, detailing what our government, and the nation’s people hoped President Reagan would deliver during the coming years.

The business of our nation goes forward. These United States are confronted with an economic affliction of great proportions. We suffer from the longest and one of the worst sustained inflations in our natural history. It distorts our economic decisions, penalizes thrift, and crushes the struggling young and the fixed-income alike. It threatens to shatter the lives of millions of our people.

Idle industries have cast workers into unemployment, human misery, and personal indignity. Those who do work are denied a fair return for their labor by a tax system which penalizes successful achievement and keeps us from maintaining full productivity.

But great as our tax burden is, it has not kept pace with public spending. For decades we have piled deficit upon deficit, mortgaging our future and our children’s future for temporary convenience of the present. To continue this long trend is to guarantee tremendous social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals. (Erickson 139)

Between the propaganda and reckless efforts of the Reagan administration, along with the powers of the national media, the concept of the American Dream was reborn and reigned widely in the minds of the American public.
The Republican ideology that dominated the eighties restored the Puritan ideal that hard work and determination were the means to any and all success. Regardless of a person’s position socially or economically, realization of the American Dream was a possibility. “However defined, the American Dream embodies the feeling that anything is possible in this nation, that opportunities are expanding and that the future will surely be better than the past” (Knight 41). For some, it was as unlikely as Horatio Alger’s Ragged Dick theory of “rags to riches,” yet the dream was presented as such a great and attainable goal that many, regardless of class, professed strong belief in this Republican-created myth of success.

Unlike the twenties, the eighties were not a romantic period, and it’s doubtful that the characters who gave it special flavor will be remembered with nostalgic affection. Oliver North and Ronald Reagan, Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky, Jim and Tammy Faye Baker, Arthur Laffer and his curve, the yuppies and the LBO kings, the hustlers and quick-buck promoters—all typified a self-indulgent and imitative age when entertainers became public leaders and when celebrities, not pioneers, scientists, or artists, became cultural heroes. (Johnson 461)

The cultural heroes of the eighties symbolize what the American Dream was supposed to be. The American Dream was not about tactical, but strategic success. Success, as defined by the American Dream, was not simply a job, or car, or even a roof to call home. The American Dream was the nice home, the expensive car, the two perfect children, and the wife hand-selected from Cosmopolitan Magazine. It was economic, social, and political success and was thought to be a possibility for all who practiced the hard work ethic and determination to achieve. Yet how real was the American Dream? Could everyone actually achieve this supposedly limitless success?

The American Dream was typified by Sherman McCoy, the bond trader in Tom Wolfe’s 1987 novel Bonfire of the Vanities, about the New York financial world. The American Dream was also Gordon Gecko, the money-hungry trader in Oliver Stone’s 1987 movie hit, Wall Street. These men were captivated with the idea of “me” or individual prosperity, which became known as the American way in the eighties. “American abundance and individual prosperity seemed more conditional than in previous decades.
Despite rising environmental sensitivity, Less Is More changed to Getting Mine” (Sewall xiii). For men like McCoy and Gecko, the American Dream and Reagan’s America were seen as anything but negative. These men did anything and everything to garner the most money and power they could possibly grasp. Moreover, the more money they made, the further away from the rest of the world they got. When Sherman and his mistress, Maria, miss the exit to Manhattan and end up in the South Bronx, they feel that they are in another world, surrounded by people whom they have nothing in common with, and more importantly, no compassion for.

Money, money, money is the incantation of today. Bewitched by an epidemic of money enchantment, Americans in the Eighties wriggle in a St. Vitus’s dance of materialism unseen since the Gilded Age or the Roaring Twenties. Under the blazing sun of money, all other values shine palely. And the M&A decade acclaims but one breed of hero: He’s the honcho with the condo and the limo and the Miró and lots and lots of dough. (Sewall 140)

Those who succeeded in Reagan’s America were already ahead to begin with. The situation was a “stacked deck” for those who ended up prospering in 1980s; thus the ability to move up was not as easy as it was made out to be. Reagan’s America and the idea of the American Dream focused solely on the ideal. In order to achieve these vaunted talked-about successes, a person (usually male) needed to be a member of the elite, an active practitioner of the ideology that Reagan believed defined America.

Ideology assumes that “I” am the norm, that everyone is like me, that anything different or other is not normal. For ideology, however, the “I,” the position which ideology speaks, is that of (usually) white male, Western, middle-upper class subject positions, of positions that see other races, classes, groups, and gender as secondary, derivative, inferior, and subservient. Ideology thus differentiates and separates groups into dominant/subordinate and superior/inferior, producing hierarchies and rankings that serve the interests of ruling powers and elites. (Kellner 61)

Many lower and middle-class Americans noted the success of people like Gordon Gecko, and hearing how easy it supposedly was to attain, then figured that they could and should live the same way. Reagan’s America had a way of initially instilling great hope and confidence in people who did not fit into their definition of ideology. As Bud Fox, the aspiring young broker said to his co-worker while talking to Gordon Gecko on the phone...
one day, "My dream is to be on the other end of that phone" (Wall Street). These members of lower-middle classes heard the Inaugural Address, listened to Reagan’s speeches, and believed that there was some light at the end of that tunnel everyone constantly talked about. Thus, money fever seemed to strike everyone in the eighties. “More Americans were living in castles or trailer parks, it seemed. For the privileged, private protection costs--gated communities, security systems, and private schools--rose, indicators of decaying quality of life beyond a few fortunate enclaves” (Sewall xiii). Yet the majority of these acquisative people would not climb out of their class ranks no matter how many objects they acquired. They were doomed to remain in the class they were born into, and as many historians and critics point out, the ability to transcend those class boundaries was oftentimes near impossible. Alan Nadel, in his book, Flatlining on the Fields of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan’s America, addressed the claims raised by Paul Fussell in his 1984 satire, Class.

While often seeming to give self-help advice about how to overcome the trappings of one’s class, at crucial points Fussell reminds the reader that everyone is locked into his or her class and thus that there is no effective way to act on that advice. To the adage that it takes three generations to make a gentleman, in other words, Fussell might be inferred to add, yes, but only if he does not retain his own parents. (Nadel 3)

Yet regardless of one’s position in life, the average American still felt that in order to achieve any upward mobility, he/she needed “things.” We were told that “greed is healthy,” and although many Americans bought into that idea, few actually enjoyed the elusive success. Moreover, in a time in which Americans were beginning to be known for their “me” attitude, many believed success to be universally possible no matter what one’s social class. “We are told, periodically, that Americans are becoming more self-involved, materialistic, spineless, or whatever, when actually only a subgroup of Americans is meant: people who are more likely to be white collar professionals—lawyers, middle managers, or social workers, for example—than machinists or sales clerks” (Ehrenreich 3).

What we oftentimes forget to mention when discussing the eighties and the myth of the American Dream is the actual situation at hand.
Nevertheless, barriers to the American Dream remain formidable. Minorities still suffer the effects of discrimination. Crime is a nationwide worry. Inflation erodes the fixed incomes of the elderly. High interest rates mean hardship for many new and aspiring homeowners. In much of America's industrial heartland, joblessness is a disillusioning scourge.

(Knight 41)

Over the course of the eighties, 11.5 million people lost jobs. In July of 1982, America's unemployment rate was at a staggering 9.5%, which marked the highest percent of unemployed people in forty years (World Almanac 417). The crime rate had soared to well over 9% during the early eighties (World Almanac 417). Fourteen percent of the American population, or thirty-three million people, was considered poor, and many of those were also homeless (Johnson 451). Almost fifty percent of American marriages were ending in divorce, and the rate of violence was higher than it had ever been (Johnson 452). Thus, where were the "tremendous social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals" that the Reagan Administration had so passionately guaranteed (Erickson 139)? Were class barriers penetrable? Was Horatio Alger's inspired idea of the American Dream an actual possibility for so many people?

Along with the many self-help books and get-rich-quick schemes, most books that were popular in the eighties were directed strictly at the white-collar world, oftentimes not even recognizing the blue-collar working class. The Feminine Mystique, The Greening of America, and Habits of the Heart, were all books aimed strictly at the upper class. Even though the majority of these books were written in the 1960s, their popularity resurfaced amidst the Republican-dominated ideology of the 1980s. The Feminine Mystique was supposed to be a landmark book for women, but it focused only on "college-educated, suburban women married to doctors, executives, psychiatrists" (Ehrenreich 4). The Greening of America and Habits of the Heart point to only the "greening" of the white-collar students, and the "moral numbness" of middle-class hearts (Ehrenreich 4). Furthermore, these were the critiques of the time that people regarded as brilliant but still depicted our situation as Americans as better than ever. Yet how could the situation be as universally American depicted when such a large group of Americans were being omitted?
Was the Ragged Dick theory of “rags to riches” so overwhelming that over fourteen percent of the American population actually had a legitimate chance of achieving the American Dream? Although in his book, Sleep Walking Through History: American in the Reagan Years, Haynes Johnson claims that artists were not cultural heroes, one such hero, Raymond Carver, did emerge and presented the world with a different perspective on the “me” people. Carver claimed, “I write oftentimes about working class people and the dark side of Reagan’s America” (Nesset 31). In the late seventies and throughout the eighties, Raymond Carver became not only spokesmen for the “dark side of Reagan’s America,” but for the millions of Americans who struggled with the myth of the American Dream. “In private desperation, Raymond Carver’s characters struggle through their lives, knowing, with occasional clarity, that the good life they had once hoped would be achieved through hard work will not come about” (Carson 1). Carver spoke not to Gordon Gecko or Sherman McCoy, but to the average man and woman, the working-class. Carver himself struggled with these notions of the good life, and in many ways, his life was a model for his characters.

Born on May 25, 1938 in Clatskaine, Oregon, Raymond Carver was the son of a lumber mill worker and a waitress. Carver grew up in small two-bedroom houses, oftentimes with only his younger brother to keep him company. Carver has called his childhood, “fairly conventional in many respects” (Williams 135). The Carvers were lower-middle class by many accounts. They were struggling, hard-working people trying to provide for themselves and their children, but as Carver once said, and shows us time and again in his stories, they were not the only family struggling to do better.

We were a poor family, didn’t have a car for the longest while, but I didn’t miss having a car. My parents worked and struggled and finally became what I guess you’d call lower-middle class. We didn’t have much of anything in the way of material goods, or spiritual goods or values either. But I didn’t have to go out and work in the fields when I was ten years old or anything of that sort. Mainly I just wanted to fish and hunt and ride around in cars with other guys. (Williams 135).
Even as a young boy, Raymond Carver dreamed of becoming a writer. As a young boy Carver wrote a story about fishing, and his mother rented a typewriter, allowing the story to have a professional feel (Williams 136). Carver even responded to various Writer's Digest ads while in high school. However, by age nineteen, Raymond Carver had a wife and two children, and his dream of becoming a writer seemed a distant reality. "We thought we could do it all. We were poor but we thought that if we kept working, if we did the right things, the right things would happen" Carver told Bruce Gentry (Gentry 123).

Carver gathered his family and headed to California in 1958 to enroll in Chico State College. At Chico State, Carver met James Gardner, one of Carver's greatest influences, and a man who would quickly take Carver under his wing and show him that writing was something much greater, "a high calling, something to be taken very seriously" (Magill 334). Yet the pressure of supporting a family was weighing heavily on Carver's shoulders, and he began taking numerous blue-collar jobs to create a steady income for his family. Many of the jobs Carver held, he was a mill hand, a delivery boy, and even a night watchman at a hospital are experiences in his life that are often recognizable in his stories (Magill 334). These jobs brought money to his family but also gave Carver the feeling of being trapped. Carver was clearly trapped in the life the Reagan Administration felt would turn positive with continued hard work and determination. He was trapped in what he wanted to do, and what he had to do. Quickly, Raymond Carver was beginning to understand that the "land of opportunity" was harder than expected to survive in as a member of the working class.

Not until 1967, when Carver took a job as a textbook editor for Science Research Associates in Palo Alto, California, was he able to relight the fire in his passion for writing (Magill 334). The following year the English Club at Sacramento State College published twenty-six of Carver's poems in the Near Klamath collection. Carver's good fortune continued into the 1970s and through the 1980s. Yet no matter how much literary success
Carver may have attained, he never forgot his upbringing, or his days as a mill hand in Sacramento. Carver never forgot the struggles he had gone through, the look of exhaustion on the faces of his co-workers in the mill, or the hopeless eyes of people stumbling through the halls of the hospital. Carver struggled and understood that no one is ever safe from struggle, regardless of where he lives, what she does, or who he is.

Thus, much of the style and content of Raymond Carver’s fiction uses his own experience to show us that in America, not everyone can attain the American Dream of excellence and success. As one of Carver’s good friends and colleagues, John Cheever, once said, “America is a country where we are haunted by a dream of excellence” (Nesset 102). Throughout Carver’s works, but especially his three most widely acclaimed collections of short fiction—Would You Please Be Quiet, Please?, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, and Cathedral—focus on the working-class American who struggles to get by, to deal with the daily chaos, and to accept his/her place in the world. Carver’s characters are waitresses, factory workers, salesmen, and alcoholics. His people are scraping to get by, but they are almost always still trying to possess the dream that America tells them is still possible.

Carver’s figures are haunted by the dream of a dream, or by something even more tenuous than that. They are bewildered not so much by vague longings and failed dreams as by the utter absence of a dream, by the black hole resulting from the dream’s disappearance. (Nesset 103)

The fiction of Raymond Carver has been analyzed from many different perspectives by many different people. However, the way in which the endings of Carver’s stories symbolize his style, his role as the voice of working-class America, and the role of the American Dream in lives of the majority of Americans during the nineteen eighties is essential in understanding what Raymond Carver has done for American literature.

“After nearly two decades of dormancy, the short story is alive and well again in North America—and Raymond Carver, foremost among a handful of writers, has been credited for its revival” (Nesset 6). In a sense, with the works of people like Raymond Carver, the eighties were a time of rebirth for the short story. “American literature is
currently enduring a downpour of literary Republicanism" (Elliot 1161). Carver’s short stories undermined this conservative Republicanism with a depiction of a separate America, and with it, created a “resurgence of interest in the short story [that] has done nothing less than revitalize the national literature” (Nesset 7).

The effect of Raymond Carver’s voice was seen in the works of many writers of the eighties such as Susan Minot, David Leavitt, Peter Cameron, and Meg Wolitzer. These writers, along with a handful of others, “... are the writers, we are told time and again, who are revolutionizing American fiction, who have initiated a short-story renaissance.” In his essay “The Literary Brat Pack” in The Eighties: A Reader, Bruce Bawer comments on these new-age writers who have captivated the literary world in the same way that the young actors of the Hollywood Brat Pack charmed movie-goers everywhere during the eighties. These writers have adapted many of the skills of those before them, especially Raymond Carver, to advance not only their own work, but the art of the short story. Like Carver, The Brat Pack writers focus on small things, happenings, and experiences, as well as presenting a solid sign of the times. “The Brat Packers are especially big on the details surrounding ‘relationships’: his brand of cologne, her favorite song. They seem to believe that one of the principal purposes of literature is to provide readers with a sort of pop sociology of young romance” (Sewall 209). Even more evident of their Carver influence, the Brat Pack writers oftentimes focus on the struggle to find communication, self, or even identification in their situation. “We are presented with young people—or young people and their families—who are in extreme emotional crisis, victims of divorce or cancer or a death in the family or an ‘inability to communicate,’ but who as a rule speak to each other only about the most banal domestic matters—about, in other words, the stories’ furnishings” (Sewall 209).

David Leavitt, the spokesman for the new generation of writers who have derived from the works of artists such as Raymond Carver, wrote, “New Voices and Old Values,”
for the New York Times in 1985, an essay that many considered a manifesto of these Brat Pack writers.

... the world described in the work of this new generation of writers is one where very little can be taken for granted or counted on, where potentially disastrous change looms around every corner and where marriages and families, rather than providing havens, are themselves the fulcrums of the most sweeping upheavals. Where the younger characters differ from their parents, however, is in their energetic insistence on rallying in the face of potential disaster. Born in an era of flux and instability, they are blessed with remarkable flexibility. They can weather changes that would floor their elders, while at the same time they cling to the values of family and marriage with a tenacity unknown to their alternately wayward and crippled parents. By necessity and disposition, they are willing to compromise—with their families, with one another and the history into which they were born. (Leavitt 27)

Leavitt calls attention to many of the writers of this new generation, along with their desires and ambitions, but also their purpose for writing short stories. As their predecessors did before them, these writers wanted to do more than simply put words to paper—to earn a living. These writers are hoping to show us something. As with Carver, this group focused not on fame and fortune, but things closer to home, things on a much more personal and human level. “Home may be the most dangerous place of all, this new generation of writers suggests, but it is also the only chance we have” (Leavitt 27).

Carver gave the common American a voice, and with it, a once-again significant place in American literary history. Carver gave us solace from the pressures of the American Dream by showing us that not everyone was capable of accomplishing the same success. The America that is oftentimes portrayed on television, or in the speeches of Ronald Reagan, is rarely the America that we have to wake up and survive in everyday. Carver detailed this difference through his characters, settings, dialogue, and most importantly, through his endings.

With Hopperesque coolness, Carver paints a disturbing picture of the ‘walking wounded of American suburbia,’ as his cast of survivors has been called; he paints a darker, more chilly America, a nation faced with limited faculties and means yet still miraculously capable of adjusting to disorder and adapting to pain. (Neset 31)
As we learned earlier, many of Carver's stories mirror his own life, and his own changes and growth through the years. Early stories such as "Fat," which tell of a waitress trapped in a life she feels she must live, but striving for one much greater, to such later stories such as "Menudo," after which the reader is left with the feeling that things may turn out all right, many of Carver's stories, and their progression over the years, mirror the changes in his life. From his early days as a mill hand in Sacramento, striving to both put food on the table and learn from the criticism of John Gardner, to his days as a recovering alcoholic looking for hope and a change, Carver is both a voice and a model for his characters. Thus, Carver's "walking wounded of America suburbia" go through significant changes throughout his career (Nesset 31). This change and growth is best demonstrated in Carver's own stories. Each of Carver's first three major collections—Would You Please Be Quiet, Please?, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, and Cathedral—demonstrates Carver's use of different endings. However, although each one is different, as Carver points out, "Almost all the characters in my stories come to the point where they realize that compromise, giving in, plays a major role in their lives" (Gentry 80). Furthermore, central to each ending, the characters experience an epiphany of sorts. "Then one single moment of revelation disrupts the pattern of their daily lives. It's a fleeting moment during which they don't want to compromise anymore. And afterwards they realize that nothing ever really changes" (Gentry 80). These moments of realization elicit different reactions and emotions from Carver's characters, realizations that distinguish each ending from another.

While some characters are left hopeless, others are outraged; and yet still some others are left with a glimpse of hope that may better their lives. These endings mirror Carver's life, the struggle to survive in America, and the fact that although we all strive for greatness and hope that we can one day achieve strategic success, the good life, the American Dream, in the end, not all of us can do it. As Carver once said, "It's strange.
You never start out life with the intention of becoming a bankrupt or an alcoholic or a cheat and a thief" (Gentry 38).

In 1977 Raymond Carver's achievement was solidified in the minds of literary critics everywhere when Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? received a National Book Award nomination (Williams 140). This collection of short stories reflected changes in both style and subject over the recent years of Carver's life. Stemming from his work with John Gardner at Chico State College, to the several endowments he received in order to allow him to write without distraction, the stories gathered to form Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? defined one of Carver's most potent devices and featured his best-known endings.

Each story in Carver's first major collection "... is peopled with the characters that became Carver's trademark--waitresses, a mailman, a vacuum-cleaner salesman, mill workers, a mechanic, collectors of unemployment" (Williams 140). Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? set the stage for his depiction of the "generic landscape of America's lower-middle class" (Williams 140). Although the stylistic devices and characteristics of Carver's writing that he used in this first collection would become staples throughout his career, the way Carver's stories concluded, the way characters and their situations found resolution, would differ. The kind of endings that Carver used derives from his own life, as well as the time he was writing about. As one of Carver's friends, Donald Justice, once said of Carver's work, "The truth is I don't know that much about the circumstances of Ray's life, but what one knows from a distance seems reflected, even recorded in these stories" (Halpert 34).

This sense of personal realism seems to me to bring an even greater sense of richness and humanity to Carver's stories and to the fate of his characters. Carver had, at one time, been where many of his characters had been. Carver had been in mills in Washington, stood watch in hospitals during the late hours of the night in Sacramento, even been a delivery man. Unlike many writers who attempt to capture "reality" as vividly
as Carver, his accounts derive oftentimes from experience. Yet even if Carver did not walk
door-to-door with a vacuum-cleaner salesman or work as a waiter in a small Italian
restaurant, he spent time with people who lived the same life. Carver did not merely pass
by these people on his way to work, he ate lunch with them, drank beer in their taverns,
and probably talked about the Dodgers with them too. Carver understood their world, their
struggle, and their needs, and he was able to speak for them.

All of Carver's endings are mysterious in ways owing to their "unresolved" nature,
but one must remember that although a Carver "plot" may be sparse, it does not necessarily
lack richness. In fact, richness may be the most telling characteristic of Carver's endings.
"Most of the stories conclude with an implication that things will be worse hereafter"
(Williams 141). The hopeless ending is a feature that Carver uses in each of his
collections, yet despair is best known for its role in the stories of Will You Please Be Quiet,
Please?. Critics have claimed that Carver's endings are always ambiguous, thus portraying
him as anything but loyal to his characters and their situation. Yet actually Carver is
nothing but loyal to his characters. In fact, he is one of the few writers who is able to
understand the hardships his people deal with on a daily basis and to comprehend what it is
like to be in a position in which life never really changes; he depicts a life in which
hardships constantly outweigh the triumphs in a society that constantly tells its citizens to
strive for a certain type of success. Thus, can there ever be a clear resolution? Does life
really give most of us a feeling that a clear resolution is likely? "Carver's stories work by
implosion, with detonation delayed until just after the closing sentence" (Meyer 23).

"Neighbors" and "Nobody Said Anything" are two stories from Will You Please Be
Quiet, Please? that demonstrate this feeling of hopelessness at story's end. Each story was
widely praised, and "Neighbors," one of Carver's first published works, was seen as the
catalyst to his aspiring career.

I was writing a short story that I'd called "The Neighbors." I finally
finished the story and sent it off to Lish. A letter came back almost
immediately telling me how much he liked it, that he was changing the title
to "Neighbors," that he was recommending to the magazine that the story be

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purchased. It was purchased, it did appear, and nothing, it seemed to me, would ever be the same. (Fires 30)

“Neighbors” is a “portrait of shared imagination and a character’s sense of difference and exclusion” (Campbell 15). “Neighbors” is the story of Bill and Arlene Miller and their feelings about how their neighbors, Jim and Harriet Stone, live a much more exciting and fulfilling life. When the Stones decide to take a vacation, they ask the Millers to watch their apartment and water their plants. However, the simple task of watching over their neighbor’s place quickly becomes a sense of escape for the Millers. Bill begins to stay longer and longer, becoming sexually aroused at times as he ventures into the lives of the Stones. He begins “taking trivial things such as cigarettes and a container of pills, and nibbling food from the refrigerator” (Magill 336).

Bill’s desire to escape to the Stones’ apartment grows, so much so that he begins slipping out of work early to merge into the lives of Jim and Harriet Stone. Bill’s obsession with the life the Stones’ lead becomes strange, almost bizarre in certain instances, as he probes deeper and deeper into their personal belongings, hoping to get a taste of the good life. On one of the days that he leaves work early, Bill opens the Stones’ apartment and begins trying on Jim’s Bermuda shorts, and even Harriet’s brassiere and panties.

He opened the closet and selected a Hawaiian shirt. He looked until he found Bermudas, neatly pressed and hanging over a pair of brown twill slacks. He shed his own clothes and slipped into the shorts and the shirt. He looked in the mirror again. He went to the living room and poured himself a drink and sipped it on his way back to the bedroom. He put on a blue shirt, a dark suit, a blue and white tie, black wing-tip shoes. The glass was empty when he went for another drink. (Will You Please 13)

Events such as these begin to occur on a regular basis, and eventually Arlene displays a fascination as great as her husband’s when she one day stumbles upon some pictures in a drawer in the Stone’s apartment. Typical of Carver’s oblique style, we are not told what the pictures show, but we can assume that the pictures in some way display the secret, personal life of Jim and Harriet Stone.
She waited until he had closed and locked their door, and then she took his arm at the muscle and said, "I guess I should tell you. I found some pictures."

He stopped in the middle of the hall. "What kind of pictures?"
"You can see for yourself," she said, and she watched him.
"No kidding," he grinned. "Where?"
"In a drawer," she said.
And then she said, "Maybe they won’t come back," and was at once astonished at her words.
"It could happen," he said. "Anything could happen."
(Will You Please 15)

When the Millers reach their apartment, they discover that the keys to the Stones' apartment have been left behind, locked in at the Stones'. At this moment of this discovery, a great sense of despair comes over the Millers. They embrace and console each other. Each tells the other not to worry, but both are somehow crushed with sorrow.
"They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves" (Will You Please 16).

As many critics have pointed out, "This is not a story about a sexually perverted couple; rather, it is a story about the fascination of visiting the secret inner reality of someone else and the excitement of temporarily taking on their identity" (Magill 337). Many Americans constantly feel dissatisfaction with who they are and what their position in life is, and Carver’s characters are the fullest embodiment of those Americans. From various instances in the story, we see how Bill and Arlene Miller see the life of the Stones' as better, indeed, much more desirable. When Bill looks in the mirror, hoping that when he opened his eyes he would have assumed the life of Jim Stone, or when Arlene views the photographs, wondering if she and Bill would ever experience things of that sort, the Millers are searching for a better life, the greater success that they are told about, and see from across their own apartment, but can not achieve.

Moreover, when the Millers visit the Stones’ apartment, each gains a revived sense of life. Bill and Arlene talk, laugh, and make love. They are experiencing the life that everyone strives for and the one that the world tells them is actually possible. In the simplest of terms, being in the Stones’ apartment makes the Millers happy. Further, the
slightest foreshadowing of a return to the life that the Millers have led before entering the Stones’ apartment reawakens a sense of desperation and emptiness. For instance, in the passage detailing Bill’s putting on Jim’s Bermudas, he is completely content draped in Jim’s Hawaiian outfit, drinking, smiling. Yet as soon as he puts on his own regular attire of suit and tie, his glass is immediately empty. Thus, for the Millers, their life is consistently a glass empty of drink, lacking spirit, fullness, and promise.

Just as the empty glass is one premonition of their return to their regular life, when the Millers are locked out of the Stones’ apartment, their fleeting moment of “success” quickly vanishes, and with it, their belief that the strategic success of the good life is a possibility. “That emotion remained suppressed as long as they possessed the opportunity to enter the other world, but in the smallest of events—locking a key inside an apartment—the prospect of their old life returns as if blown in on an ill wind” (Campbell 17). To most, an event such as locking a key inside an apartment is trivial, or unfortunate at best. However, for Carver’s characters, such an event is devastating.

The devastating nature of the event leaves Bill and Arlene Miller in a state of hopelessness. The Millers are typical Carver characters in their way of being “not simply voyeurs but ‘voyeurs . . . of their own experience’ ” (Nesset 12). When they are locked out of the Stone’s apartment, the Millers are shut out of the life they so desperately wanted to have. The keys represent the life the Millers dream of. The keys open the doors to their freedom, revive their sex life, revivify their marriage, and rekindle their desire to live and to experience. These keys were the means to “sudden, astonishing glimpses behind the curtain which separates their empty lives from chaos” (Nesset 12).

What the Millers saw behind the door of the Stones’ apartment was the “good life.” They saw what they had seen on television, read in the newspapers, and heard in passing conversation. The good life was right there for Bill and Arlene, only a few feet across the hall. However, the Stone’s closeness, and the Millers’ ability to see accurately what they want, makes the situation all the more real, and all the more characteristic of Raymond
Carver. Bill and Arlene have to wake up and watch people, people directly across the hall, people who they know, people who live the life they desire. The Millers hope that that life might be a possibility for them. Yet as the door shuts, and the keys are locked irrevocably within the apartment, everything reverts back to the way it was. Bill and Arlene do not say anything to each other, yet both know what has been lost:

... lovers brace themselves against the consequence of inauthentic passion, a false kind of love which, requiring its stimulus from outside influence, feeds on the attractive possibilities of other worlds and other lives at the cost of self. (Nesset 13)

They are not destined to live the same lives as Jim and Harriet Stone. With this painful recognition comes a multitude of emotions, but more than anything, a feeling of hopelessness. The Millers embrace each other in-between the door to their world and the Stones' door. They tell each other not to worry, yet both know that any hope they had for the embracing the good life has been locked inside the apartment with the Stones' keys. Their feelings of fear and lost hope have been “suppressed as long as they possessed the opportunity to enter the other world” (Campbell 17). Moreover, “...in the smallest of events--locking a key inside an apartment—the prospect of their old life returns as if blown in on an ill wind” (Campbell 17). As the wind comes, hope is blown away along with it, leaving Bill and Arlene Miller embracing, yet unsure what the future may hold.

Being unsure of what the future may hold was a reoccurring thought in the minds of many during the eighties. As with many of his characters, Bill and Arlene Miller demonstrate Carver's connection to the time, as well as his ability to represent typical people of that time. In 1988, Studs Terkel gave America another look at the American Dream with his book, The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on the American Dream. In a book made up of interviews with myriad American people, from mill workers to businessmen, Studs Terkel gave his readers a searching look into the lives of everyday Americans. Terkel talked to the type of people we read about in the stories of Raymond Carver. Terkel's book is filled of people struggling to find the answers that Reagan told them were easy to find. Some of Terkel's people are sad, some fearful, and some simply furious at
the situation they are dealing with. These interviews underscore the powerful nature of Carver’s characters, their authenticity, and the reality of their situation. Reading about these various “real” people illustrates Carver’s compassion for his characters and his ability to relate to their situation in life.

One person who Terkel talked to, a man who in many ways lives with the same fears as the Millers, is Brian Devlin. A twenty-two-year-old member of a housing crew, Brian is a hard-worker, hoping to get ahead in life, not necessarily to live the life of a rich man, but just one better than his father had, one as good as the next guy. As much as the Millers fantasize, the minute they step outside the Stone’s apartment, fear sets in: the fear that they won’t be able to do as well, won’t be able to have the same things, do the same things, and visit the same places. The Millers want a taste of what everyone has told them they can have. Brian Devlin lives with many of the same fears. “My old man worked hard to get where he’s at. I don’t want to come along and in fifteen years I end up bein’ a lower-class broke person. You’d feel like a bum. It’s the fear about maybe takin’ a step down in society. Everyone’s got that fear” (Terkel 197). These people, these Millers, Stones, and Devlins, only want to do well, to experience the success that everyone in the world hopes for. They work hard for what they have, and they work even harder to get what they think they can have. Yet as we have seen with Carver’s characters, sometimes no matter what people do, they will never get the same things as their neighbors. With success comes fear, and in a time when the pressure to succeed is greater than ever, everyone is fearful.

The behavior of Bill and Arlene Miller, along with the same feeling of hopelessness, is echoed in the narrator of “Nobody Said Anything” (Campbell 17). In this early Carver collection, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? “Nobody Said Anything” is the story of a boy, much like Bill Miller, who lies and steals, hoping to find a life much brighter and fuller than his own.
While love was central to the situation of the Millers, family struggle is the focus of the young boy's conflict. The boy's family is coming apart. He witnesses his parents fight on a daily basis, neither having the ability to cease any of the quarreling. Although he strives to face up to his painful environment in a mature fashion, the boy is still young and forced to deal with disintegration; thus, and oftentimes, he has no one who can comfort him, or at least no one to listen to what he is dealing with.

One morning it is his parents, instead of his alarm clock, that signal that it is time to rise.

I could hear them out in the kitchen. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but they were arguing. Then it got quiet and she started to cry. I elbowed George [his brother]. I thought he would wake up and say something to them so they would feel guilty and stop. (Will You Please 43)

From the first scene in the story we get a sense of the same hopelessness found in the lives of Bill and Arlene Miller, when George responds, "I don't care" when sound of his parent's arguing wakes him (Will You Please 43). After some normal sibling bickering, the boys get ready for school, yet the narrator says he is not feeling well.

Caught up in their own world of unhappiness and despair, his parents are unable to see that their youngest son is only pretending to be sick. Yet we soon discover that the boy's desire to stay home comes not from sadness over his situation, but rather to discover the "mysteries of the outside world" (Campbell 9).

I waited until she had started the car and it was warm. I listened as she pulled away from the curb. Then I got up and turned the sound on loud and went for the weeds. I smoked one and beat off while I watched a show about doctors and nurses. Then I turned to the other channel. Then I turned the off the TV. I didn't feel like watching. (Will You Please 44)

The narrator "attempts to discover the mysteries of sex by snooping around in his parents' room, searching for condoms, going through their drawers, and trying to read sexual secrets on the label of a Vaseline jar" (Campbell 9). His daily life is full of yelling and screaming, yet somehow he knows there is a better life out there. He is aware of the "mysteries," and like any young, hurt boy, he is in search of answers.
After flipping between television shows and numerous masturbation sessions, the boy becomes restless and in search of more answers. He decides to go fishing. Not surprising, Raymond Carver was an avid fisherman as a child, and an ardent lover of the outdoors. Speaking of his childhood, as we learned before, Carver once said, “Mainly I just wanted to fish and hunt, and ride around in cars with other guys” (Williams 135).

Yet, on his way to fish at Birch Creek, the boy gets a ride from a mysterious woman in a red car. The event serves as a great escape for the narrator. Although the woman is much older, he looks at her as a means to his escape, a sexual goddess of sorts. “Her hair was up in curlers. But she was sharp enough. She had a brown sweater with nice boobs inside” (Will You Please 47). The boy immediately begins imagining a sexual experience with the woman in the red car. He begins living out the things he thought of when watching the television programs with doctors and nurses. He thinks of what it must be like to unlock one of the doors to those “mysteries of sex” (Campbell 9).

I couldn’t think of anything more to say. I looked out the window and sucked my cheeks. 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. I began to get a boner thinking about it. I moved the cap over my lap and closed my eyes and tried to think about baseball. (Will You Please 47)

However, the boy cannot bring himself to confront the mysterious lady with his thoughts of sexual hunger. When the sexy driver lets him out of her red car near Birch Creek, the boy is mad at himself for letting opportunity pass him by, and he “chides himself for his failure to think of all that comes to him now that it is too late” (Campbell 9).

Yet it is at Birch Creek where the most powerful events in the boy’s day of playing hooky occur. At the creek, another boy is fishing, and the two join together to catch an enormous fish, striking in beauty and size. The fish becomes the boy’s greatest of his small triumphs for the day.

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. (Will You Please 56)
After catching the fish and marveling at their skill, the boys have to decide who is going to keep the fish. They argue about who did more work, or who really deserves to have the fish, but finally decide to split the fish in two, each taking a piece home to show everyone what they have accomplished. The boy takes out his knife and cuts the fish in two; one has the head, and the other, a rare green tail. After minutes of bickering on what half they want, the boys agree and go their separate ways, each with a significant piece of fish and the feeling of completing a great task.

We were wet and shivering. We looked at him, kept touching him. We pried open his big mouth and felt his rows of teeth. His sides were scarred, whitish welts were as big as quarters and kind of puffy. There were nicks out of his head around his eyes and on his snout where I guess he had banged into the rocks and been in fights. But he was so 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. But I thought he was something. (Will You Please 57)

However, as he arrives home, his feeling of bliss is interrupted by his bickering parents. The fish becomes a symbol of his escape but also of his imprisonment. As he proudly brings the fish in the house to show his parents what he has done, they yell at him to take it outside. Although he is yelled at, the fish serves as means to silencing his parents' bickering. It is another small triumph, and in understanding it, the boy holds the fish high, in awe of its silver shine under the light. "What was there looked silver under the porch light" (Will You Please 61).

"Nobody Said Anything" continues the theme of hopelessness, and in this case, a boy's "desire to break the bonds of his life and enter into some liberating knowledge" (Campbell 17). Moreover, it is a story of small triumphs (Campbell 9), "an epiphany of spiritual fullness, in spite of its smallness. In Carver's world, small triumphs are magnified by their intensity, but often missed [by the reader] because of his indirection" (Campbell 9). However, as Carver shows with his use of dialogue and his style, a small triumph can mean much more than meets the eye. Although the fish has given the boy
freedom from the pain he feels at home, he knows, like the fish, that “He’s not going anyplace. There’s no place for him to go” (Will Your Please 50).

Through the sharp edges Carver had created might be blunted temporarily by such tactics, they retained their ability to cut. Time and again, his characters discovered this. Bleeding, they were pressed for some resolution, some response of their own by story’s close. Often, we found them shrugging. Muddled and immobilized, they seemed incapable of even an attempt to save themselves. Worse—and emblematic perhaps of a greater despair, a cultural hopelessness—they seemed reduced to the level of static mannequins, deaf to and mute about their situations, the cat having irrevocably caught them by the tongue. (Campbell 119)

The narrator of “Nobody Said Anything” is left outside, much like Bill and Arlene Miller, to ponder the future. He stands and holds the fish close to him. “I lifted him out. I held him. I held that half of him” (Will You Please 61). As with the Millers, the boy is left embracing the only other thing that understands his pain. As he embraces the fish he realizes that although he can play hooky from school, dream of sexual escapades with older women, and fish at Birch Creek, nothing really ever changes. He is left hopeless. When he wakes tomorrow, he’ll probably hear his parents’ bickering, eat breakfast, and go to school. Thus, as with the Millers, he’ll have to wait for another day, another chance to get away, to fish, to experience a small triumph, and once again, to find temporary hope.

When Carver published his next collection of short fiction, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, many stories reinforced this final feeling of lost hope so often depicted in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? Yet another meaning is emerging from the endings of Carver’s stories. When a reader or character achieves one of life’s small triumphs, he/she experiences widely differing feelings. While the Millers and the young boy in “Nobody Said Anything” were left hopeless, Carver characters in this collection are outraged. The feeling that they must return to the life that they were leading before angers them. Moreover, the recognition that life will never change, or that once again another problem has surfaced to add to their already chaotic life, fills Carver’s characters with frustration and despair.
Many instances of anger through frustration dominated the eighties. From the murder of John Lennon to the attempted assassination of President Reagan, we consistently saw people angry with the position in life that they held and most likely would continue to hold in life. The men displaying these feelings of anger and lost hope were attempting to do what many of Carver's characters do: somehow to possess the brighter, fuller life they see before them. These men became caught up in their fleeting experience. Their dreams turned into fantasies, and with their fantasies came a different version of the American Dream. "John Hinkley believed in the American Dream, but in his mind it was twisted into an American Dream Fantasy. His girlfriends were fantasies. And his ambitions were fantasies. And in a sense, his crime, his assassination attempt, was a fantasy too" (Latham 18). Yet, as with many people who got caught up in the American Dream quest, John Hinkley came from a normal, upwardly mobile family. "His father believed in the Horatio Alger American Dream of working your way to the top" (Latham 18). Moreover, the types of things that John Hinkley fantasized about--the girls, the money, the notoriety--are all things that many Americans at one time or another fantasize about. John Hinkley's problems were obviously of a much more serious nature, but some of his fantasy can be seen in certain characters in Carver's stories, mainly these stories of outrage.

Now, we have all dreamed American Dreams similar to Hinkley's, have all indulged at one time or another in the fast-fame fantasy, have all lost ourselves from time to time at the movies. There is a little John Hinkley in all of us. He is the underbelly of our ambitions. He is our bad fantasies. He is the flip side--as they say in the record business he so wanted to break into--of our inventiveness. (Latham 18)

Hinkley was similar to many characters found in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. As with many of Carver's character's, Hinkley was a drifter. These drifters saw no light at the end of the tunnel that Horatio Alger depicts as attainable. These drifters fantasized about another American Dream, one of instant proportions. These Americans so desperately wanted to change their position that their passion became anger, and with it came the end of their fleeting moment of success.
Although Carver's characters are not cold-blooded, certifiably insane killers like John Hinkley, many do display feelings of anger and outrage at their position in American society. In *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Carver concentrates on these outraged characters and in the process becomes widely known as one of America's greatest writers of short fiction. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* defines Carver as a minimalist master, acclaimed for his technique of paring fiction down to the absolute core, or as Carver said of his stories, "cutting everything down to the marrow, not just the bone" (Campbell 31). This dissection made Carver's stories shorter in length, but full of richness, and in the end, defined his greatness.

The best way to understand what we talk about when we talk about Carver's style is to look searchingly into the stories themselves, to observe with a minimum of external clutter, avoiding the ready snares of terminologies as we approach the seemingly unapproachable heart of Carver's technique. (Neset 30)

This process of cutting led to Carver's most Hemingway-influenced collection of short stories. From his days with John Gardner, even to earlier periods in his life, the influence of Hemingway in Carver's fiction is clear. Moreover, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* displays Hemingway's presence to a greater extent than ever through his "theory of omission," which would soon become Carver's trademark.

Thus, as the times changed, so did Raymond Carver, and with that personal change, his fiction. As one critic said of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, it is "Seventeen tales of Hopelessville, its marriages and alcoholic wreckage, told in a prose as sparingly clear as a fifth of iced Smirnoff" (Stull 10). On June 2, 1977 Raymond Carver had stopped drinking, and his sobriety inspired in him as it had in one of his short-story writer predecessors, John O'Hara, a tireless desire to write. Carver revamped dozens upon dozens of stories that would make up *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, published in 1981, as well as other collections such as *Furious Seasons*, *Fires*, *Cathedral*, and *If It You Please*. Life, as Raymond Carver knew it, changed. Unlike his
characters, he achieved "the other life," and the brilliant nature of his stories marked the change (Stull 9).

The same chaos that dominates Carver's character's lives is still prevalent in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. Yet the "psychic stakes have risen," and their hopelessness rests on the edge of outrage (Nesset 31). "While the characters in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? seem primarily inert, timid, and harmless in the face of confusion, their successors in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love carry those plights to the next remove" (Nesset 31).

Characters such as the Millers and the young boy in "Neighbors" had a certain timid way to them. They were left without hope, but they were also numb to the situation at hand, unwillingly confused about how to seek refuge. The characters we see in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love are "intimidated rather than timid," as well as angry at the chaos that the world presents to them (Nesset 31). Therefore, the endings of many of the stories in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love leave characters "hovering precariously close to violence..." (Nesset 31). Endings to stories such as "Tell the Women We're Going" and "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off," leave the characters in fits of rage, violent, and close to murder.

As many critics have asserted about What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, the characters portray a different mood. "Characters are not handled as opportunities for complicity between writer and reader, but rather as emblems of the way in which life bears down hard on all of us" (Williams 144). One of those stories, "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off," is a perfect example of how Carver brings in these new devices, while still capturing "the grotesque other, the recurring obsessive personality, and the persuasive despair" found in previous collections (Campbell 36).

The main character in this story is a man called Dummy. Dummy, like the obese man in "Fat," is Carver's prototypical grotesque character, one who affects the lives of those he meets in ways unknown to him. "He was a little wrinkled man, bald-headed,
short but very powerful in the arms and legs. If he grinned, which was seldom, his lips folded back over brown, broken teeth. It gave him a crafty expression” (What We Talk About 90). Moreover, Carver continues in his descriptions of the strange character, focusing on his vision. “His watery eyes stayed fastened on your mouth when you were talking—and if you weren’t, they’d go someplace queer on your body” (What We Talk About 90).

Carver continues his description of Dummy and his position at the Cascade Lumber Company in Yakima, Washington. Carver describes Dummy’s hearing disability, his position and duties at the mill, and the people who take pleasure in poking fun at Dummy. “Carl Lowe, Ted Slade, Johnny Wait, they were the worst kidders of the ones who kidded Dummy. But Dummy took it all in stride. I think he’d gotten used to it” (What We Talk About 90). In the first few pages of “The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off,” Carver creates a feeling of pent-up anger and the sense that frustration is one day going to overflow and explode (Campbell 36).

The story is narrated by a young boy whose father works with Dummy at the Cascade Lumber Company. Yet the boy’s father, a saw-filer, is different from most men at the company. While the majority of the men enjoy harassing Dummy, the boy’s father befriends the odd little man, and they forge an unspoken friendship. In many ways, the boy’s father feels sorry for Dummy and his situation both at work and at home: Dummy is married to an unfaithful woman. Rumors constantly surface both around town and in the mill about her escapades with other men, but many believe them to be created solely to hurt Dummy. “Dummy had a wife as well as a house. She was a woman years younger and said to go around with Mexicans. Father said it was busy bodies that said that, men like Lowe and Wait and Slade” (What We Talk About 91). Thus, Dummy confides in the narrator’s father seeking advice, and when the father tells Dummy to buy some bass fingerlings for his pond, he orders them right away.
Acquiring the fish for his stocked pond engenders the greatest change in Dummy’s mood, demeanor, and life. With the fish come more and more infidelities by his wife, and an even greater isolation of Dummy from his co-workers. The fish become something much more than a hobby for Dummy; he becomes emotionally attached to them. "Dummy wouldn’t let anyone come around now anymore. He put up fencing all around the pasture, and then he fenced off the pond with electrical barbed wire. They said it cost him all his savings for that fence" (What We Talk About 93). His paranoia about the fish, and his relationship with them, drive him and the narrator’s father further apart. As the fish grow older and bigger and are ready to provide sport, the narrator’s father tries to convince Dummy that the fish need to be thinned out. The boy’s father offers his and his son’s services and help, but Dummy is angered by the idea and becomes extremely irrational in both actions and words. The situation comes to a head when the young boy, Jack, catches a prize-winning bass from Dummy’s pond, and Dummy demands that he throw it back. "Now what the hell’s matter with you, Dummy? The boy’s got hold of the biggest bass I’ve ever seen, and he ain’t going to throw him back, by God’ " (What We Talk About 98)! Dummy grabs the boy’s line and the fish gets away, angering the boy and his father, but comforting Dummy.

Later, a flood washes away all the fish in Dummy’s enclosure, emptying his pond and his life. Dummy’s fleeting triumph in owning such a wonderful pond is quickly washed away, pushing Dummy to an edge more keenly felt than most characters feel. "You didn’t doubt that most of Dummy’s fish had been carried off. But those that hadn’t been were free to come and go" (What We Talk About 100). His fish are gone and so is Dummy’s desire to deal with what life has in store for him.

Yet soon after the storm comes to a halt, and coincidentally a day before the boy’s birthday, his father receives a phone call. Dummy has killed his wife and himself. Pushed to the edge and no longer able to deal with his position in life, Dummy cannot deal with hopelessness, and thus his fear and frustration give away to violent outrage.
As in “Nobody Said Anything,” the fish represents something much greater. For Dummy, the fish are the repository to the small amount of faith he has in life. The fish are an escape, but more importantly, they give Dummy a sense of loyalty. While his wife is constantly off with other men, the fish are always there for Dummy. The fish do not lie, they do not poke fun, and they do not tell Dummy what he could and could not achieve. The fish are the Stones’ apartment for Dummy, and when they are washed up, so is Dummy. However, the difference in these endings from previous ones is that Dummy does not give in passively to hopelessness; his emotions intensify in search for the heart of his dissatisfaction with life. His wife is supposed to be the one person who could comfort him. His wife is supposed to love him, care for him, and help him in times of need. Instead, his wife is a mistress to many men, and another crack in Dummy’s psyche.

Dummy finally becomes the prototypical blue-collar worker revolting against his situation. Although he is not positive exactly who his wife is going off to see, he figures that they are men with better positions in society. Dummy feels she is off to see the self-involved, materialistic white-collar man that Ehrenreich claims Americans are striving to be like. As many blue-collar workers revolted in the eighties, using strikes and union walkouts to combat the unfair conditions of their working lives, Dummy personally revolts, not collectively but individually.

Dummy’s revolt is symbolic of the many strikes during the eighties, with none bigger than the PATCO strike during the mid-eighties. Over 11,600 employees, responsible for “directing, routing, and controlling landings and takeoffs of all commercial air traffic in the nation, began a nationwide walkout” (Johnson 163). The PATCO union had “legitimate grievances” about the increasing work hours and technological equipment that was unsatisfactory, yet the strike was illegal due to the “public oath taken by air controllers” (Johnson 164). Instead of finding a way to compromise with the workers, President Reagan used the event as a political forum, attempting to demonstrate to the nation his strong will and decisive nature. Reagan fired the entire union of air controllers.
and sent in government armed forces to take over their duties. While the workers lost their jobs and their union, PATCO “lost union certification and went bankrupt” (Johnson 165).

Kaphy Long was a flight attendant striking against Trans World Airlines around the same time as the PATCO strikes, and during her hard times, talked to Studs Terkel, proving once again, that there is more than one kind of American Dream. Kaphy told Terkel about how she started being a flight attendant, and eventually how she was nominated for Flight Attendant of the Year. Kaphy spoke of how hard she worked, but how her supervisor said she would not win the award until she became more social with those in higher positions. “You aren’t social enough with the high muckety-mucks, you don’t come into the office and chit-chat with us. I thought the job was to chit-chat with the passengers, not to brown-nose management” (Terkel 334). Kaphy learned, as Dummy did, that doing what one is supposed to, what everyone deems as right, is somehow never enough.

Kaphy talked of how after her realization during the Flight Attendant of the Year event, “her attitude toward the job had changed” (Terkel 334). Kaphy became more vocal, more of a presence in the union, more apt to stand up for what she thought was right and wrong. Being at the bottom of the seniority list means whenever there are cuts, people like Kaphy are the first to go. Strikes happens and strikes hurt. “People have lost their homes. It’s broken up marriages. So when someone says the company is nice—’You don’t know how good we really are’—you bet I question it” (Terke1336).

Although Dummy’s wife lives with him and seems to lead a similar life, she is in many ways, a member of the subgroup that Ehrenreich mentions. A member of the white-collar group, Kaphy Long needs to “chit-chat” with in order to move up in the world (Terkel 334). Dummy’s wife has her own agenda for how she will attain success, or at least get a foot in the door toward fulfilling the American Dream. As Dummy’s wife is a part of the ideology, Dummy is not. “Ideology is thus part of a system of domination which serves to further oppression by legitimating forces and institutions that repress and
oppress people” (Kellner 61). Dummy’s wife symbolizes an American attitude toward solidifying success in the eighties. As Ann Clurman, Senior Vice President of the Yankelovich Clancy Shulman market research firm has said, “‘The 1950s sense was, If I play by the rules, I’ll make it up the economic ladder rung by rung. Now it’s more like, I’m not sure I’m going to win even if I play by all the rules’” (Sewall 144). This idea defined Sherman McCoy and Gordon Gecko (remember them?): do whatever it takes, no matter how, and who gets hurt. While having lunch one day discussing work, Sherman’s father tells him, “There’s no integrity involved now, it’s all about the money” (Bonfire of the Vanities). To men like Gecko and McCoy, playing by the rules meant missing out.

Dummy attempts to play by the rules, as most of Carver’s characters do, and his fairness makes him a victim.

Furious by once again being left the victim of a system designed for certain groups of people, Dummy loses control. “His [Dummy’s] repressed sense of outrage, like the flood waters, finally bursts its boundaries, manifesting itself in murder and suicide” (Campbell 37). Yet like almost every ending does in the fiction of Raymond Carver, people are left unsure of what lies ahead. “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 . . . . That arm coming up and going back down in the water, it was like so long to good times and hello to bad” (What We Talk About 103). Dummy is dead; he has killed his wife and left Jack and his father to deal with the wreckage. Jack suggests how Dummy’s death made his father take a turn for the worse. This sense of outrage that Carver uses continues the theme of insecurity, yet in this case it is Jack’s father, and the rest of Dummy’s friends who are unsettled. The feeling is captured best by Jack at story’s end: “Is that what happens when a friend dies? Bad luck for the pals he left behind?” (What We Talk About 103)

Carver continues with the theme of outrage periodically throughout What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, and in “Tell The Women We’re Going” he depicts a
vicious outrage spawned from character's dissatisfaction with the life he is leading. Carver creates a sense of dissatisfaction with the search for the American Dream, or more accurately with failure to fulfill the American Dream.

"Tell The Women We're Going" is a story of two life-long friends. Bill Jamison and Jerry Roberts had been best friends "forever." The men had gone to high school together, experienced all the ups and downs of adolescence together, spent summers together, and eventually gone on to college together. They shared everything. "... wore each other's shirts and sweaters and pegged pants, and dated and banged the same girls—whichever came up as a matter of course" (What We Talk About 57). Once in college, Jerry married a girl name Carol (a girl who Bill had once dated), and dropped out of school. Although the two felt things would not change between them, their graduation from high school was a considerable turning point in their relationship as best friends.

Jerry saw the American Dream shimmering before him and took a chance. The wife, the job, hard-work and determination, all the success in the world would soon be knocking down his door. Jerry fell victim to idea of "getting mine," stressed by Gilbert T. Sewall in The Eighties: A Reader (Sewall xiii). Jerry was a believer in the system and ready to be a part of the American abundance and prosperity.

Bill continued on at school while Jerry worked at Robby's Mart. Bill would go over to Jerry and Carol's apartment daily to converse, hang-out, and listen to records. Things were still good, but different.

But sometimes Carol and Jerry would start making out right with Bill still there, and he'd have to get up and excuse himself and take a walk to Dezorn's Service Station to get some Coke because there was only the one bed in the apartment, a hide-away that came down in the living room. Or sometimes Jerry and Carol would head off to the bathroom, and Bill would have to move to the kitchen and pretend to be interested in the cupboards and the refrigerator and not try to listen. (What We Talk About 58)

Thus, Bill stopped visiting Jerry and Carol much anymore. Bill graduated, got a job at the Darigold plant, and found a girl named Linda. Once settled, Bill and Linda would occasionally go over and visit with Jerry and Carol. The four of them would listen
to music, drink beer, discuss whatever it was that was going on in their lives. Eventually, Bill and Linda married and continued their ties with Jerry and Carol, the couples getting together almost every Saturday and Sunday. Yet things turned out to be different. “But once, in the middle of all this happiness, Bill looked at Jerry and thought how much older Jerry looked, a lot older than twenty-two” (What We Talk About 59). Bill continued to look at his friend, reminiscing about the past, and thinking about the present and future. “By then Jerry was the happy father of two kids and had moved up to assistant manager at Robby’s, and Carol had one in the oven again” (What We Talk About 58).

“Getting mine” did not seem to be as easy or as glamorous as Jerry had expected, and the consequences were evident to those who knew him best. Bill comments on how old Jerry looks for his age, broken down by the quest for individual prosperity and the abundance known as the American Dream.

One Saturday or Sunday when the two families are together to barbecue, amidst the casual conversation about work and cars, Bill said, “Anything wrong, man? I mean, you know?” (What We Talk About 60). Jerry never answers Bill’s question. He squirms a bit, nodding or shrugging, but only says, “How about a little run?” (What We Talk About 60).

The two friends hop into Jerry’s car and onto the Naches River highway for a drive, ultimately deciding to stop to bowl, have a few beers, and perhaps talk of old times. Not too much is said about their present lives, the states of their marriages, or their overall happiness with the life they are leading. A man at the bowling alley stops the two to find out how they had been. “‘So how you boys doing? Where you been keeping yourselves? You boys getting any on the side? Jerry, last time I seen you, your old lady was six months gone.’” (What We Talk About 61). Jerry immediately changes the topic.

The past brings back many great memories for Bill and Jerry, but at the same time, it reminds them of how much happier they were, especially Jerry. Jerry never says he regrets the decisions he has made, but through what he says and does not say, we know that he feels cheated. Jerry has done what is supposedly expected of an aspiring an
upwardly mobile American, and his efforts have left him unsatisfied and unsure of how much better life will actually get. In many ways, Jerry believes the best times of his life have already passed him by. In some ways, Jerry represents the feelings Carver had himself as a young husband and father. In no way did Carver feel his best days were behind him when he married Maryann at age nineteen; in fact, he thought the exact opposite. However, Carver did display the same feeling of being trapped that Jerry demonstrates while talking to Bill. Carver wanted more from his life. He wanted to be a writer, not a mill hand or delivery boy. Jerry does not want to succumb to being what he is now for the rest of his life. Like most Carver characters, Jerry wants something greater. Jerry wants the richer, fuller life he knows exists.

When Bill and Jerry finish their beers, they jump back in Jerry’s car and head for home. On their way home, Jerry and Bill spot two young girls. Once the girls are seen, Jerry’s mood and demeanor quickly change, as he says, “I could use some of that” (What We Talk About 61). Bill does not say much and is uncomfortable with their old antics of wooing young girls as they did as teenagers. After several tries to ignore Jerry, the girls stop, drop their bikes, and talk to Bill and Jerry. Jerry flirts with the girls, asks them their names, where they live, and other small talk. The girls, Sharon and Barbara, tell the men they were going to Picture Rock. After a bit more small talk, the girls leave, making Jerry upset.

At first the entire event looks to be Jerry and Bill repeating what they used to do as boys, before heading back home to reality. Yet the event calls forth a much greater display of emotions. Ultimately the situation becomes one man’s battle with an unsatisfied life. A life without the fun, excitement, or success once thought possible, has once again captured the mind and body of one of Carver’s characters, leaving what will transpire a fearful mystery. Moreover, Jerry feels the American Dream of hard-work and determination that Reagan and so many others had told him could lead to success, is becoming more and more distant. Thus, Jerry moves towards another American Dream, and “instant Rock Star
American Dream," that had also captivated others such as John Hinkley (Latham 18). As with Hinkley, Jerry was becoming "the underbelly of our ambitions," he was becoming our "bad fantasies" (Latham 18).

Jerry decides that they should head to Picture Rock and wait for the girls. Bill is indecisive and keeps looking at his watch. As the girls approach the entrance on their bikes, Jerry and Bill got out of their car and attempt to once again flirt with the girls. However, the girls are not interested and begin to demonstrate some fear of the strange men. "'What are you guys following us for?' (What We Talk About 65). The men say nothing and chase them up the path. Angry with the girl's reluctant behavior, Jerry's outrage reached its peak, leaving Bill speechless.

Bill had just wanted to fuck. Or even to see them naked. On the other hand, it was okay with him if it didn't work out. He never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock. Jerry used the same rock on both girls, first on the girl called Sharon and then on the one that was supposed to be Bill's. (What We Talk About 66)

Two girls were dead, and Bill is left to deal with his best friend. Jerry, like Dummy, can no longer deal with his situation. Bill is comparable to Jack and Jack's father in that he is left to deal with what is left of his friend's outrage. In the eyes of their friends, Carver's two killers had a lot. Dummy had his wife and his fish, while Jerry had his family and friends; in the end however, we see that inside, the two had nothing close to what they actually desired. Dummy and Jerry are both working-class people attempting to climb their way up the ladder, eventually acquiring the success that America told them was possible. Jerry got lost in the abundance of America that at one time in his life seemed so promising. The wife, the kids, the house, and the job are supposed to equal sweet success, but as with Dummy, success is sometimes bittersweet.

In Carver's third major collection of short stories, Cathedral, we see an even more drastic change in the endings than in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. "In Cathedral, and Cathedral only, we witness rare moments of near self-disenfranchisement, occasional bright openings in closed down lives, however temporary those openings may
be” (Nesset 52). The change in Carver’s style marks a change in his life. His new life of sobriety and his love for his wife, Tess Gallagher, is visible in his stories. Many critics consider Cathedral to demonstrate some of Carver’s greatest achievements in writing. “The stories in Cathedral leave no doubt that [Carver] has moved away from the ‘minimalist’ style into one that is more expansive, inclusive, and generous” (Stull 10).

Carver’s new-found style may have had impact on the endings to certain stories in Cathedral, yet the change also sheds light on another aspect of the life of an American working-class.

The defining features of Carver’s fiction alter during the period between the two books. The voice remains the same, but the vision becomes less grounded in despair. The fictional framework is enlarged and reinforced by traditional structures. Empty spaces fill with beginnings, middles, ends. Truncations vanish; where once the narrative halted in emotional tumult, the story continues and equilibrium is restored. Despair becomes redemption; the alienated are reconciled. Hard-boiled realism turns out to be allegory with a soft center. (Campbell 48)

Raymond Carver certainly is an exceptionally talented imaginative writer, but he grew up as a member of that lower-middle-class society, and as he grew, he became their voice because in many ways never left his roots. Through the late seventies and early eighties, Raymond Carver was a struggling writer, a hard-working American attempting to better his life and follow his passion. His rise to fame as one of America’s great short story writers, his battle to achieve sobriety, and his fight to find true love are all symbolic of the working-class Americans he writes about. In a sense, Carver himself was searching for the American Dream. Although his goals and successes may not be stereotypical of the American Dream, what Carver does show us, and what is illustrated in Cathedral, is that every once and a while light does exist at the end of the tunnel.

The vision now, today is, I suppose, more helpful than it was. But for the most part, things don’t work out for the characters in the stories. Things perish and ideals and people’s goals and visions—they perish. But sometimes, oftentimes, the people themselves don’t perish. They have to pull up their socks and go on. (Nesset 102)

Sometimes glimmers of hope can radiate into a knowledge, a better outlook on life, or a touch of hope that can allow one to go on to the next day.
"A Small, Good Thing" and "Cathedral" are two stories in Cathedral that have received national attention over the years and have become Carver's most anthologized stories. "They are arguably his best stories, and they appeal to a wider audience than his other work, perhaps accidentally because of the expansiveness, the generosity that Carver felt in his life and allowed to enter his work" (Carson 4). Although "these stories, most popular among all his work, are least representative of the bulk of his writing," they still present the reader with the idea that although the future may be better, it is still uncertain (Carson 4).

In "Cathedral" as well as in "A Small, Good Thing" there was perhaps a new emphasis, a compassion for how we have to deal with each other. Which is not to say the stories are better or worse. Ray was sensitive to the change of middlebrow critics that his work was consistently depressing. In "Cathedral" he was saying that although life is tragic, perhaps once in a while you can beat the odds. (Halpert 140)

What friend and fellow writer Jay McInerney may have said about "Cathedral" and "A Small, Good Thing" probably sums up the collection and its purpose best. Carver is not hoping to find a new audience, nor is he solely out to make his work less "depressing"; he is hoping to show his audience that although the members of the lower class oftentimes lose out, sometimes the tide turns, and he, Raymond Carver, is an example.

"With the major institutional changes of the 1980s, a visible shift in literary criteria took place, and no story better illustrates this shift than "A Small, Good Thing" (Campbell 49). "A Small, Good Thing" is Carver's most celebrated story, the first-place winner for Prize Stories in 1983. As with several other stories, Carver went back to an earlier story, "The Bath," in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, and reworked the story to create "A Small, Good Thing." Yet, as Carver said of the stories, "In my own mind I consider them to be really two entirely different stories, not just different versions of the same story" (Gentry 102). Carver continues his discussion of the two stories, calling "A Small, Good Thing" unfinished business. "I went back to that one, as well as several others, because I felt there was unfinished business that needed attending to. The story
hadn’t been told originally; it had been messed around with, condensed and compressed in ‘The Bath’ to highlight the qualities of menace I wanted to emphasize” (Gentry 102).

“Whereas ‘The Bath’ is a story about a mysterious eruption into any life, ‘A Small, Good Thing’ is a story that moves toward a more conventionally moral ending of acceptance” (Meyer 338). “A Small, Good Thing,” like the other stories analyzed here, has a unique way of reflecting the people of the time and the shifts taking place in the world around them. Ewing Campbell detects a shift in the emphasis in the later 1980s that became increasingly evident in Carver’s later work. “The story’s record of awards and reprinting testifies to the cultural shift towards sentimentality that characterizes the decade of the eighties and expresses the degree to which devalued elements appreciated during the shift.” (Campbell 49)

“A Small, Good Thing” is the story of the Weiss, and their hospitalized son Scotty who was hit by a car on his birthday and left on the verge of death. At the beginning of the story, Ann is headed to the baker to order Scotty’s favorite chocolate cake for his birthday. Ann gives the baker all the information needed, along with some casual conversation about how her son is turning eight and how excited they all are. The baker is tired, in no real hurry, and somewhat passive towards Mrs. Weiss. “There were no pleasantries between them, just the minimum exchange of words, the necessary information. He made her feel uncomfortable, and she didn’t like it” (Cathedral 60). Eventually Ann finishes with the baker, then takes her receipt showing that the cake can be picked up on Monday morning.

Walking to school on the morning of his birthday, Scotty steps off the curb without looking and is struck by an oncoming car. “He fell on his side, his head in the gutter, his legs in the road moving as if he were climbing a wall” (Cathedral 61). Confused and visibly shaken, Scotty rises to his feet, speechless. Once the driver sees the boy get onto his feet, he speeds away. Scotty’s friend is unsure of what to do, asks him various questions, but Scotty does not answer, instead, he turns and walks home while the other boy goes on to school. When he arrives home, Scotty briefly tells his mother what has
happened, then closes his eyes and falls into a coma. "Thinking she would call the doctor anyway—he suddenly lay back on the sofa, closed his eyes, and went limp" (Cathedral 61).

Everything has changed. The birthday party is canceled and the lives of the Weisses has taken a drastic turn for the worse. The parents set up a vigil next to Scotty’s hospital bed, praying for signs of recovery. Ann and Howard take turns going home to gather their thoughts and bathe. "The father feels that his life has gone smoothly until this point, and the story thus suggests that neither he nor his wife has ever had their comfortable middle-class life threatened by such a terrifying disruption before" (Meyer 339). Howard drives home reminiscing of the past years, and how good life has been, curious as to where he went wrong, or what it was he did to deserve this tragedy.

Until now, his life had gone smoothly and to his satisfaction—college, marriage, another year of college for the advanced degree in business, a junior partnership in an investment firm. Fatherhood. He was happy and, so far, lucky—he knew that. His parents were still living, his brothers, sister were established, his friends from college had gone out to take their places in the world. So far, he had kept away from any real harm, from those forces he knew existed and that could cripple or bring down a man if the luck went bad, if things suddenly turned. (Cathedral 62)

As soon as Howard walks through the door, the phone rings. Having a child in the hospital, fighting a coma, makes phone calls extremely stressful events. Angry, scared, and fearful of what might be the "news" of the call, Howard answers quickly. It is the baker on the other end. The baker tells Howard that their cake is in, ready to be picked. Not knowing anything about the cake, tired, and nervous, Howard tells the man he has no idea what he is talking about and to leave him alone. The call marks the second connection between the Weisses and the baker and thus sets the tone for the for the most important moment in "A Small, Good Thing."

Once back at the hospital, Howard fails to make the connection of the phone call when asked if anyone had called. "'I don’t know who, just somebody with nothing better to do than call up people. You go on now'" (Cathedral 64). Ann and Howard continue to pray by their son’s bedside. Scotty’s unfortunate accident has brought his parents closer. In their time of need, Ann feels the love and compassion for Howard that sometimes in the
daily routine of life, is missing. "For the first time, she felt they were together in it, this trouble. She realized with a start that, until now, it had been happening to her and to Scotty. She hadn't let Howard into it, though he was there and needed all along. She felt glad to be his wife" (Cathedral 68).

Ann is reluctant to leave her son, but she is finally persuaded to go home, to bathe and regroup. On her way out of the hospital, Ann encounters an African American family waiting to hear about the condition of their son. They are obviously worried about the health of their son, constantly asking the nurses questions. Ann stops and explains her situation, looking for both compassion and a sense of understanding by those dealing with the same situation. "She wanted to talk more with these people who were in the same afraid. They had that in common" (Cathedral 74). Yet Ann leaves wanting to explain her own whole terrible happening, about Scotty, his birthday, everything. However, she is left speechless and must head for home.

Like Howard before her, Ann receives a call from the baker while at home to bathe. However, the baker never tells Ann it is he, or what he is calling for; he only refers to Scotty. "‘It is about Scotty,’ the voice said. ‘It has to do with Scotty, yes’" (Cathedral 75). Ann calls the hospital fearing the worst, but finds out the hospital never called, that everything was stable. Like Howard, Ann never makes the connection and quickly returns to the hospital.

After parking the car, and going up to the third floor of the hospital, Ann ventures down the corridor, into the alcove where she had met the African American family. Curious as to how they and their son were doing, Ann stops. "They were gone now, but the chairs were scattered in such a way that it looked as if people had just jumped up from them the minute before" (Cathedral 77-78). As she walks around, Ann catches the eye of one of the nurses, who tells her that Franklin, the black boy, has died. Ann tells the nurse why she is there, drops her head, and continues to Scotty’s room.
Howard is sitting in the room with Scotty when she opens the door. Howard tells her how the doctors are going to do some more tests, but things look stable. They try to talk to their son, fearing the possibility that this may be the last time. They watch him and caress his head.

The boy looked at them, but without any sign of recognition. Then his mouth opened, his eyes scrunch closed, and he howled until he had no more air in his lungs. His face seemed to relax and soften then. His lips parted as his last breath was puffed through his throat and exhaled gently through the clenched teeth. (Cathedral 80)

The next day, Doctor Francis tells Ann and Howard that Scotty has died of a hidden occlusion, and that it is a “one-in-a-million circumstance” (Cathedral 80). Ann and Howard cry with rage and sadness, not believing that they have lost their only son so easily. They tell the doctors how they do not know how such a thing could happen, but the doctors only say they are sorry.

Once they arrive home, the Weisses attempt to clean up some of Scotty’s “life.” Howard places some toys in a box, stressing that their son is gone, and the two of them must start dealing with it. Why did this happen to us, the Weisses say? What did we do to deserve this? We live in a nice home, have good jobs, a great kid, and we do everything we are supposed to do. As Howard has said on his drive home from the hospital, he has done everything essentially by the book—the way he had been told. In the plan for the ideal life, tragedy is not supposed to happen. This is where a story, like “A Small, Good Thing,” which is said not to be Carveresque, demonstrates the style and voice that Carver has used since the beginning, one that can be found in each of his stories. Howard is unhappy with what life has brought him, looking for a reason why tragedy has happened to him and not his neighbor.

While all this soul-searching is happening, the phone rings. The voice on the other end is the same one from the day before, asking about Scotty, telling Ann that Scotty is ready. “It was him,’ she said. ‘That bastard. I’d like to kill him’ ” (Cathedral 83). At first Ann is still unsure of who the mystery caller is, but she eventually realizes, and has
Howard drive her to the bakery shop. “‘That’s who’s calling. That’s who has the number and keeps calling us. To harass us about the cake. The baker, that bastard’” (Cathedral 84).

They arrive at the bakery around midnight. Only a few cars are in the parking lot of the shopping center, and only a dim light can be seen in the far back of the bakery. Ann and Howard see a man and hear a radio playing in the back. After the man tells him he is busy and it is late, the two make their way into the back to confront the baker. The encounter is much like the first one that started the story. The baker is short, quite rude, and obviously not very worried about Ann’s concerns. She eventually tells him what has happened to her son, and with that revelation, comes the most pivotal piece of the story, the defining “connection” of the story’s ending.

Once the baker hears the terrible news, his demeanor and attitude immediately change. “The baker had cleared a space for them at the table. He shoved the adding machine to one side, along with the stacks of notepaper and receipts. . . . Howard and Ann sat down and pulled their chairs up to the table. The baker sat down, too” (Cathedral 87). He apologizes and shares with them his own sadness and loneliness.

“I’m just a baker. I don’t claim to be anything else. Maybe once, maybe years ago, I was a different kind of human being. I’ve forgotten, I don’t know for sure. But I’m not any longer, if I ever was. Now I’m just a baker. That don’t excuse my doing what I did, I know. But I’m deeply sorry. I’m sorry for your son, and sorry for my part in this.” (Cathedral 87)

Ann and Howard listen to the baker. They stop their profanities, their anger. They listen to his apologies, his reasons for why he isn’t evil, and even his advice. “‘You probably need to eat something,’ the baker said. ‘You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this,’ he said” (Cathedral 88).

The baker and the Weisses continue talking and eating into the early hours of the morning. They talk of loneliness, sadness, of the small ups and downs that make life so great, but so hard. Whereas in other Carver stories, Ann and Howard would be left in the parking lot, crying, embracing each other, “A Small, Good Thing” leaves us thinking that
hope exists. Moreover, in other endings discussed, Ann and Howard could have resorted to rage against the baker, yet they don’t. “The story ends in reconciliation in the warm and comfortable bakery as the couple, in an almost Christian ritual of breaking bread together, eat the baker’s bread and talk into the early morning, not wanting to leave” (Meyer 339).

“A Small, Good Thing ’ is a story that moves toward a more congenitally moral ending of acceptance” (Meyer 339). Ann and Howard are not finished grieving, but they see that they are going to be able to deal with what is ahead. “At the heart of their emphasis, at the very source of their weakness, a small fragment of hope arises that allows the characters to continue living and to nudge themselves further along the dead-end roads of their lives” (Nesset 102). Further, they see that although they live a careful middle-class life, they are no different from blue-collar workers like the baker. Both must deal with hardship, with loneliness, and with emptiness. “They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years, and repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty” (Cathedral 88-89). The bread in the oven is a parody of pregnancy and birth, demonstrating the loneliness and emptiness which has haunted the baker. “The bakery marks the true nature of a healing unification” for both Ann and Howard, as well as for the baker (Meyer 339). In “A Small, Good Thing” Carver shows us that we are all living in the same world, dealing with the same triumphs and hardships, and more importantly, “how simple and moral life is after all” (Meyer 339).

The issue of simplicity and morals in our lives is captured again in Carver’s highly acclaimed, and probably most popular story, “Cathedral.” As with many of his other stories, the collection compiled as Cathedral brought Carver many awards and nominations for such accolades as the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award. However, it was the title story that in the eyes of many “declared [Carver’s] independence as a master” (Stull 10).
As with "A Small, Good Thing," "Cathedral" presents Carver's audience with a different sort of ending. The stories are spoken with the same voice, yet a bit of hope comes out, hope that is not there in earlier stories.

Something remarkable happens in that story that usually doesn't happen in a Carver story. It was a different kind of ending. The ending of a usual Carver story leaves you on the brink of an abyss, and you look down into it. In "Cathedral" it's more like you're looking up at the sky and the sun is coming out. It's an unusual story for Ray in many ways, and I think he was proud of it for that reason. (Halpert 139)

Moreover, we get a sense in these stories that people are beginning to understand one another better. Carver's characters are becoming more compassionate and accepting of the different lives that people lead, and they are not only recognizing the difference, but striving to learn something from it.

During the years Carver is writing the stories for What We Talk About When We Talk About Love and Cathedral, his life mirrors his work in the sense that things are changing. The basis for Carver's change is Tess Gallagher. Carver's relationship with Gallagher comes at a time when Carver has hit rock-bottom; his marriage to Maryann is over, he is estranged from his children, and he has been sober for only five months (Williams 142). Unable to write consistently or maintain his duties at the University of California at Santa Barbara due to his battles with alcohol, Carver found himself "completely out of control and in a very grave place" (Williams 140). Carver meets Tess Gallagher, a poet, at a writer's conference in El Paso in November 1977, and then reunites with her when he accepts a teaching position at the University of Texas El Paso the following year. While traveling on her Guggenheim Fellowship, Gallagher decides to move to El Paso in 1979 to be closer to Carver. Tess effects Carver unlike anyone else. She provides a source of light for the darkness which has been blanketing Carver for so long. Tess moves Carver, and in a sense, moves his writing as well. She brings a sense of change through inspiration; on the inside of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love reads "For Tess Gallagher", and on the inside of Where I'm Calling From reads, "To Tess Gallagher." Through Carver's marriage at nineteen and divorce soon after, his many
blue collar jobs, his dream to become a writer, and his battle with alcoholism, Tess Gallagher became the peaceful force, the source of stability, and figure of change that he so desperately needed.

As with his life, the stories of Raymond Carver continue to grow, expanding while taking the bumps and bruises along the way. “This title story of Carver’s third collection is typical of how his technique and thematic concerns change after his own personal life became more stabilized” (Meyer 339). At the time the stories for Cathedral are written, Carver accepts a permanent position at Syracuse University’s writing program. Further, Carver and Gallagher travel back and forth between upstate New York and Gallagher’s hometown of Port Angeles, Washington were Carver does much of his writing (Williams 144). It is there, in Port Angeles that Carver writes “Cathedral.” As Carver told Mona Simpson, “‘Cathedral’ is totally different in conception and execution from any stories that had come before. I experienced this rush and I felt, ‘This is what it’s all about, this is the reason we do this.’ There is an opening up when I wrote the story. I knew I’d gone as far the other way as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone” (Williams 144). Carver’s life has achieved a stability that had been missing for since his days as a mill-hand and night watchman at the hospital in San Diego. He has his work, his writing, but most importantly, he has love and hope to accompany it.

As many critics have praised Cathedral as Carver’s most mature work; the maturity shows in the characters of the stories. “At an earlier time, the main character might not have overcome his unnamed fears and done something odd to offend Robert [the blind man]” (Carson 4). Carver’s people show a much greater equanimity toward their own situation in life and the situation of those surrounding them, and it is this new-found maturity that allows his characters to find hope where they once discovered pure hopelessness or outrage. “And yet while such scenarios reflect to an extent the darkest periods of Carver’s early married life, they also attest to his triumph, to that miraculous
recovery of sorts, and to Carver's uncanny capacity for transforming life into art, for erecting a monument to pain even as he learned to transcend it" (Nesset 2).

“Cathedral” is the story of how a blind man, who is at one time disliked by the narrator, teaches the young speaker a valuable lesson about life and the way we should deal with other people. The story begins with the narrator talking about an old friend of his wife's, a blind man named Robert, who is coming to visit them soon after the death of his wife. From the opening pages, the reader sees how the narrator is quite cynical about the blind man coming, as well as his relationship with his wife. “And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to” (Cathedral 209).

The narrator continues to discuss his “wife's previous marriage, her friendship with the blind man, and even the blind man’s wife Beulah, who has recently died” (Meyer 340). Throughout this recollection much is talked about, yet the narrator focuses on the audio tapes his wife and the blind man have been sending each other over the years. Whether it is the sense of intimate conversation or close personal contact, the narrator is obviously jealous of the relationship the blind man has with his wife. “In time, she put it all on a tape and sent the tape to the blind man. Over the years, she put all kinds of stuff on tapes and sent the tapes off lickety-split” (Cathedral 211). The tapes and the poems she would send anger the narrator immensely, but he tries to hide his upset. However, on one occasion during their conversation about the past and the blind man, the narrator's wife mentions that he was on one of the tapes. Curious and a bit fearful of the possibility, the narrator agrees to listen, unsure of how to feel.

This was a year ago. I was on the tape, she said. So I said okay, I'd listen to it. I got us drinks and we settled down in the living room. We made ready to listen. First she inserted the tape into the player and adjusted a couple of dials. Then she pushed the lever. The tape squeaked and someone began to talk in this loud voice. She lowered the volume. After a few minutes of harmless chitchat, I heard my own name in the mouth of this stranger, this blind man I didn't even know! And then this: “From all you've said about him I can conclude—” But we were interrupted, a knock
at the door, something, and we didn’t ever get back to the tape. Maybe it was just as well. I’d heard all I wanted to. (Cathedral 212)

Robert, the blind man, arrives soon after the playing of the tape, and the narrator continues with his distrust, indeed disgust toward Robert. “It reveals him [the narrator] as an insensitive character who has prejudged notions about a variety of subjects” (Meyer 340). This idea of the narrator’s insensitivity and prejudice is seen not only through his actions, but his thoughts of how his only image of a blind man is in movies, and how he wonders whether Robert’s wife is “a Negro” because her name is Beulah (Meyer 340).

Once the blind man arrives, the center of the story begins to take over. Carver uncharacteristically continues with the background information, detailing how the blind man had met Beulah, and how the two fell in love. The narrator’s sense of jealousy towards the blind man heightens as his wife drives to the depot to pick up Robert. “With nothing to do but wait—sure, I blamed him for that—I was having a drink and watching the TV when I heard the car pull into the drive. I got up from the sofa with my drink and went to the window to have a look” (Cathedral 214). The narrator is angry that he has to share his wife, his only “friend,” with someone else. The man is wholly dependent on her, and he senses that that stability is being threatened.

As the blind Robert walks into their home, he quickly displays a feeling of comfort in both his actions and his words, which, to the narrator, is both the opposite of what he expected, but also even more threatening. “Robert is pure blazing personality, an extradurable and appropriate guide, a man capable of pulling his host from his shell” (Nesset 67). The men talk gingerly about Robert’s train ride and other travels, while the narrator observes Robert’s every move. Further, the narrator looks Robert up and down, describing in detail his dress, his beard, but most importantly his eyes.

At first glance, his eyes looked like anyone else’s eyes. But if you looked close, there was something different about them. Too much white in the iris, for one thing, and the pupils seemed to move around in the sockets without his knowing it or being able to stop it. Creepy. As I stared at his face, I saw the left pupil turn in toward his nose while the other made an effort to keep in one place. But it was only an effort, for that eye was on the roam without his knowing it or wanting it to be. (Cathedral 216)
After a bit more casual conversation, drinks are made and dinner is served. The three eat as if it is their last meal, devouring everything from mashed potatoes and green beans to strawberry pie. As he did when Robert first entered, the narrator continues to watch the blind man’s every move. “I watched with admiration as he used his knife and fork on the meat” (Cathedral 217). As they finish the feast, the three relax, make drinks, and begin talking. During the conversation, the narrator is a bit of an outsider. The narrator’s wife and her blind friend Robert talk of old times and past experiences together, while the narrator listens jealously. “They talked of things that had happened to them— to them!—these past ten years. I waited in vain to hear my name on my wife’s sweet lips: ‘And then my dear husband came into my life’—something like that” (Cathedral 218). However, nothing of the sort is said, and the narrator’s jealousy rises, as he hears more of how great Robert is. “More talk of Robert. Robert had done a little of everything, it seemed, a regular blind jack-of-all-trades” (Cathedral 218).

Conversation continues in the same manner until the narrator invites Robert to join him and his wife in smoking marijuana. Robert has never smoked marijuana but happily agrees, telling the two, “‘There’s a first time for everything’” (Cathedral 220). As the three of them sit on the sofa, the narrator’s wife between her husband and Robert, the narrator’s tone with Robert lightens, and he becomes a bit more accepting of his wife’s friend. Soon after smoking, the narrator’s wife becomes tired and falls asleep. The narrator asks Robert if he is tired and wants to go to bed, but Robert tells the narrator that he wants to stay up with him. “‘No, I’ll stay up with you, bub. I’ll stay up until you’re ready to turn in. We haven’t had a chance to talk’” (Cathedral 222). To the narrator’s surprise, he is actually glad that Robert wants to stay up with him, watch TV, and talk. The narrator becomes friendlier with Robert asking him what he wants to watch, and Robert responds with an answer that foreshadows things to come. “‘What ever you want to watch is okay. I’m always learning something. Learning never ends. It won’t hurt me to learn something tonight. I got ears,’ he said” (Cathedral 222).
What takes place after Robert says he wants to stay up and watch TV is the climax of Carver’s remarkable story. The men get into a confrontation of sorts as the narrator leaves the TV on a program about churches in the Middle Ages because nothing else is on. The program is specifically about cathedrals. “The TV showed this one cathedral. Then there was a long, slow look at another one. Finally, the picture switched to the famous one in Paris, with its flying buttresses and its spires reaching up to the clouds” (Cathedral 223). The narrator begins to wonder whether or not Robert knows what a cathedral is. “Do you have any idea what a cathedral is? What they look like, that is? Do you follow me? If somebody says cathedral to you, do you have any notion what they’re talking about?” (Cathedral 223-224). Robert tells the narrator what he knows, and believes cathedrals to look like. Robert talks of the many workers who slaved for years and years building the exquisite features. However, Robert asks the narrator to describe a cathedral to him, as he sees it.

What seemingly looks to be an easy task, describing a cathedral to the blind man, becomes an extremely difficult job for the narrator. The narrator tries to think back to the cathedrals he has seen in books, visited, or even viewed on television, yet he struggles to provide an accurate description.

He stopped nodding and leaned forward on the edge of the sofa. As he listened to me, he was running his fingers through his beard. I wasn’t getting through to him, I could see that. But he waited for me to go on just the same. He nodded, like he was trying to encourage me. I tried to think what else to say. “They’re really big,” I said. “They’re massive. They’re built of stone. Marble, too, sometimes. In those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be close to God. In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone’s life. You could tell this from their cathedral-building. I’m sorry,” I said, “but it looks like that’s the best I can do for you. I’m just no good at it.” (Cathedral 225)

After fumbling around with various descriptions, the narrator stops, then tells Robert that cathedrals mean nothing to him; they are merely something to look at. Robert listens and then asks the narrator to bring him some paper and a pen. When the narrator returns, Robert explains how together, they are going to draw a cathedral. Robert places his hand over the narrator’s hand, following along as the narrator begins to draw a
cathedral. Robert asks the narrator to close his eyes while he draws. While they are drawing, the narrator's wife opens her eyes and asks them what they are doing. Ironically, the narrator does not respond. He draws and listens to the blind man. "His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now" (Cathedral 228). As they finish drawing, the narrator keeps his eyes closed, saying, "It was really something" (Cathedral 228). This typical Carver language is very simple, yet it clearly demonstrates how the experience has changed the narrator. "The indefiniteness of his language--he is usually more glib than he seems here--expresses both the sheer incomprehensibility of his revelation and the fact that he registers it as such" (Nesset 69).

The narrator has started the story an angry man, jealous of his wife's experiences and of his position in her life, yet he leaves the story with a smile on his face and an experience all his own. For so much of the story, the narrator talks of his wife's past experiences, dramatizing his own lack of a journey and personal success. However, Robert, a supposedly simple blind man, has given the narrator the experience, the knowledge, and the feeling of human connection that his wife had attained years before, and almost all Carver characters strive for, but rarely achieve.

Real human connection may be something that Carver's characters rarely have the ability to make, yet almost all of them do learn from the experiences of others. Whether it be their neighbor, their best friend, a co-worker, or even a baker, Carver's characters do at one stage in their stories learn from those around them. The narrator in "Cathedral" may learn more from another than any other Carver character. The blind man changes the narrator's view, his perception of himself, his wife, and even his wife's dear friend.

At the time of his interview with Studs Terkel, Robert Franke was teaching a Science and Society course at the University of Arkansas-Little Rock. Robert told Terkel about his hopes for learning from others and the power of change. He spoke of how his students came from conservative middle-class backgrounds, believing that "education is something they want, something they need" (Terkel 43). Robert explained to his
interviewer how when he first encountered the students, they saw education much differently from what they did when they left. "But their definition of education is something else. To them, education is not treated as an opportunity to explore new ideas, to sort out what other people think. For most of these young people, to be educated is to better articulate what they stand for, why they're right" (Terkel 44). In many ways, the narrator in "Cathedral" originally thought this same way. To take into account the ideas and experiences of others takes time. "Though these few haven't wholly abandoned the teaching of their parents and church, they taking into account other ideas, and one day these will fall into place with earlier views" (Terkel 45).

The most telling and moving part of Robert Franke's interview takes place when he discusses how he taught the disease part of the course, and the class discussed AIDS. "The prevailing attitude in class threw me for a loop: people with AIDS deserve to die. Others would say, I want nothing to do with them" (Terkel 46). These students were holding on to only their own ideas, beliefs, and experiences. They were showing no compassion. Yet when Robert showed them a video on AIDS and those dying with the disease, the students were moved intensely, "some even cried openly" (Terkel 47). Robert Franke, ironically sharing the same first name as Carver's blind man, was able to teach these students, give them another view, a different experience.

The last scene mirrors that of the Weisses in "A Small, Good Thing." "The tonal shift in the final sequence of the story, then, marked by the mild ethereality flooding the last lines, itself illustrates the opening up the narrator has undergone, and is yet to undergo" (Nesset 69). In a situation in which things look only to get worse, the characters are moved by the most unlikely of sources. As the baker did for the Weisses, Robert does for the narrator. Common, lower-to middle-class people such as the baker and Robert show the rest of the characters that all of us are living the same life. Everyone is striving to do well, to be happy. Robert and the baker also know that success does not have to be defined by someone else. What makes one happy, might not do it for another, yet we must
make the best with what we have. Moreover, the narrator and the baker teach the characters around them the power of people. They show the other characters how learning from each other, understanding each other, and most importantly, helping each other, is essential in life. While some are richer than others, some more powerful, and others more beautiful, in the end, the differences are not that great. As Robert says to the narrator during their conversation about cathedrals and the workers who built them, "they're no different than the rest of us" (Cathedral 224).

As the endings to Raymond Carver's stories managed to change throughout this career, his style would forever be characterized by one word. Although the degree to which Carver's work is minimalist seem to dissipate by the time his last stories are published in Where I'm Calling From, the word has unfortunately become synonymous with Carver's style and stories.

As defined by Cynthia J. Hallett in her "Minimalism and the Short Story," minimalism in literature is often characterized by aesthetic exclusion. "Often what does not appear in the work is more important to the reader than what does appear. The writer must suggest that there is more to the story than what appears on the pages and the reader must have a chance to correctly infer what has been missing." Moreover, critics feel that minimalist writers have the ability to show an entire society through small instances of human experience, or, as writer Amy Hempel claims, "A lot of times what's not reported in your work is more important than what actually appears on the page. Frequently the emotional focus of the story is some underlying event that may not be described or even referred to in the story" (Sapp 82-83).

Minimalism is not something new, but a term that has been used to describe the style and works of some of America's greatest writers. "The seeds of art and artifice that inform both literary minimalism in general and the short story in particular can be traced to such otherwise diverse writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Ernest Hemingway" (Hallett 2). The work of Raymond Carver has many of
the same elements as these great short story and fiction writers. Yet as with someone as influential to Carver as Ernest Hemingway might agree, resorting to categorizing their work, and categorizing it as minimalist, may be stripping their stories and their voices of their heart and soul. For what Hemingway and other significant short fiction writers were searching for was something far greater than the bounds of categories and other labels. These writers, “were led to the short story in part by . . . the ‘thinness’ of American Life, its lack of a rich and complex social texture: the brief poetic tale . . . seemed the natural form for their intense but isolated experiences” (Litz 4). Much of the desire to show compassion for that “thinness” is evident in the short stories of the minimalist writers.

Carver and others are striving to be a voice for the “thinness,” for the lack of communication, vision, and ability to “connect with others” (Hallet 3). However, the best connection the minimalist writers may have with their mentors, and the most accurate description of their purpose for writing short stories, may be their desire to voice the “problem of alienation and the individual’s quest for self-fulfillment—and the results [of] their efforts” (Garcia 499). Carver’s characters are people fighting the boundaries of normal, everyday life. They are searching for success in a world they can not identify with. “From the earliest story to the last, Carver’s characters are unhappily estranged, out of work, disillusioned by meaningless jobs and meaningless marriages; they suffer in various degrees from alcoholism as well as bad luck and bad timing, battered by a world which typically leaves them inert and speechless in the wake of longings and fears they cannot begin to identify (Neset 4). Through different circumstances, these characters search, but almost always, the results alienate them, leaving the characters motionless.

Critics believe that “in some minimalist short fiction, the action seems totally gratuitous and all emotion swept under the surface of a dispassionate narrative voice and unmodulated dialogue” (Hallett 3). Making such a sweeping indictment about fiction so widely acclaimed seems unfair, and leaves many, including me, dumbfounded. However, John Gardner, the long-time teacher and friend of Raymond Carver, addressed this issue of
style in his book, *The Art of Fiction*. “Suppression of the artist’s personality can be virtually total . . . [the] abnegation of individual style is so complete that . . . we cannot tell one writer’s work from another’s; yet the very suppression of style is style—an aesthetic choice, an expression of emotion” (Gardner 136). The absence of emotion is one of the most talked-about issues in short fiction and the so-called minimalist writers. Many critics believe that the authors are not compassionate towards their characters, that they leave them, alone, helpless. “Thus, minimalist prose creates not only the illusion of a ‘storyless story’ in its commitment to apparently disjointed fragments, but also of an ‘authorless story,’ in its extraordinary power to articulate a different voice” (Hallett 3).

Yet the one stylistic device that labels a writer minimalist, and the issue that critics almost always attack first, is how “much of what is omitted becomes significant by its absence” (Hallet 3). In his essay “Reality in the Modern Short Story,” Charles May reflected on this issue by calling it “Chekhovian uniting of the lyrical and the realistic . . . a basic characteristic of the modern short story” (May 371). In fact, many believe that the short stories of the minimalist writers are merely pieces of longer stories. These stories may be short in length but endless in their ability to touch upon universal knowledge and experience. “Although the minimalist story often has an air of bleakness about it, just as often it is laced with humor—cutting, sad, understated, black, but humor nonetheless” (Hallet 5). When we first read these minimalist stories or hear of their dark nature, we are often quick to judge, quick to point out that something is missing, that what is presented is arbitrary, minimal. However, when we step back, think of ourselves, of our own lives and the lives of others, what is not there becomes visible. “With artful precision, minimalist short story writers tell nothing, rather they show—and the showing, often a mere glance, actually reveals all—but the readers must get the point themselves” (Hallet 5). This ability to show, not tell, and show in small glimpses, is something that only few can do successfully. Fellow writer and good friend of Carver, Tobias Woolf, claims that these glimpses “inscribe themselves forever on the reader’s moral being and bring the world into
sharper focus. They take on the nature of memory itself. In this way the experience of something [forms] no less than the experience of something lived through” (Woolf xiv, xii).

Now, however, after hearing so much praise heaped on minimalism, one might be confused about why so many writers, especially Carver, have reacted so harshly when the term minimalism is associated with their work. Carver once said, “somebody called me a ‘minimalist’ writer. But I didn’t like it. There’s something about ‘minimalist’ that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don’t like” (Simpson 210). To Carver, minimalism seemed to imply that something was wrong about less, along with its “sloppy connection to the disciplines from which it was borrowed, and considering the fact that the practitioners of literary ‘minimalism’ boast in general far more differences than similarities in terms of individual craft” (Nesset 4). In an interview with Sam Halpert, Carver’s friend Geoffrey Wolff answered a question about his reaction to the criticism of Carver being called a minimalist writer:

I’ll make one comment off the bat. The comment has been well considered, and the scholarly term for the comment is bullshit. I’m not sure I know what a minimalist is. I kind of think I know what people mean when they say they think they know what a minimalist is—that it is a taker-outer rather than a putter-inner. And to a certain degree, Ray was that. He like to lean things down, but not always. He was certainly capable of being a putter-inner too. Ray wrote enough. It was a wonderful thing that Stanely Elkin, who is certainly no minimalist, said. He said that he didn’t understand what this less is more crap was about. He said, “Less is less. More is more. And enough is enough.” And Ray was someone who knew what enough was. . . . There are people who are tricksters, hacks, workshop writers who think they are imitating Carver in the way they were imitating Hemingway in an earlier time. They’ve created an atmosphere of sparseness and niggardliness, and there’s no sense of life beneath the work. It’s just lean and white spaces. But Ray wrote enough. His stories are full. As I say, there was a time when he was getting close to the edge, and in some instances not worth mentioning here he actually did go over the edge. Yes, he came close to crossing the line, as actually “Hills Like White Elephants” comes close to crossing that line. It could be argued that there is insufficient information in that story. But this minimalist crap is not worth talking about (Halpert 127-128).

No matter if it is writing, painting, or even music, critics love categorizing art. Commentators have called Carver’s work everything from hyperrealism to dirty realism,
yet "minimalism, sadly enough, seems to be the name that has stuck, not only for Carver, but for his contemporaries" (Nesset 30). Carver’s work contains all the elements associated with minimalism. He wrote less, he omitted, he wrote of thinness, he wrote about the painful quest, and all together these ideas do not make up a minimalist story, but a Carver story. However, to group his work with others, or resort to explaining his short stories as following a pattern, would only tarnish what Carver has done for American literature, and what Carver has done to “push the possibility of absolute art to the limit” (Hallett 5). One of Carver’s friends and fellow writer, Frederick Barthelme, may have had the answer. When an artist hears his/her work categorized as minimalist, “Tell them that you prefer to think you’re leaving room for the readers, at least for the ones who like to use their imaginations; that you hope those readers hear the whispers, catch the feints and shadows, gather the traces, sense the pressures, and that meanwhile the prose tricks them into drama, and the drama breaks their hearts” (Barthelme 27).

If Carver’s stories have to be called anything, humanism may be most accurate. Carver’s work is human from beginning to end. From the young boy fantasizing about the woman in the car in “Nobody Said Anything,” to the Jack’s father, not knowing what to say or do, when he hears of his friend Dummy in “The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off,” Carver’s stories have the ability to create a realness as true as the human spirit: “… the word human is a touchstone for Carver. It not only comes up repeatedly in his conversations but also, in substantial if tacit ways, resonated in every aspect of his work, from the darkest story to the most joyful poem” (Nesset 8). Moreover, his friend Donald Justice said of Carver’s ability:

He’s a real artist, which I very much appreciate, and he has a very strong sense of humanity. That is the easiest way I can put that. He has a great human sympathy, which I don’t believe all writers have, and I am of the opinion all writers should have it. He has it automatically, just generously from the spirit. Those are the two aspects of his artistry in particular I admire, especially as they go together (Halpert 32).

Many have resorted to putting Carver’s work into the minimalist “box” because his reliance on fallible humanity. During the eighties, people were not expected to be flawed
and human; they were expected to be automatons. People in the eighties were supposed to want the same things, strive for the same heights, and attain the same goals. Gordon Gecko was never human, and it was not until the end of the story that we discover a glimpse of the human spirit within Sherman McCoy, when he finally took the Biblical words of Peter Fallow, and actually thought about; “What’s the profit of a man who gains the world, if he loses his soul” (Bonfire of the Vanities). Carver’s characters did not make much of a profit, but many of them hold strong to the one thing they do have, their soul.

Raymond Carver did not set out to write less because he thought less was more. As Geoff Wolff said, “Ray wrote enough” (Halpert 127). During the time of “me” and at the height of materialistic excess, Carver’s short stories and the style in which they were written are the complete opposite of our nation’s spectrum. Carver did not attempt imitate Ronald Reagan and “recapture optimism, strength, enterprise, and inventiveness” (Johnson 13). Instead, Carver chose to recapture the variousness of life. Carver chose not to tell stories of young boys who fight hard, then one day become great bankers in New York. Instead, he wrote of those young boys, and their adventures on quests on the days they skipped school, searching for a reason why their parents always fought, or why their mother was always drunk. He chronicled the small happenings during the walk home, the simple events that meant more than anything. Richard Ford attempts to explain the essence of a Carver story during an interview with Sam Halpert:

I suppose. He would tell you something, and then he’d tell you something else, and then he’d tell you something else. And every time he’d go to the next, to the next, to the next. It was surprising, dramatic, extremely informative emotionally. As soon as you realized what he’d told you, you realized the great hazardous possibility of overlooking those things: in ordinary life moments, small events, utterances; and that for our humanity to survive they need to be observed. The other thing I loved about his work is that I thought it was very funny... Again, he managed to do what great writing does, to deliver the fullest array of human response to complicated life. In that way it was often very instructive work (Halpert 159).

Carver wrote not of the abundance of wealth and power, but the struggle to taste a small bit, and more importantly, those bumps and bruises that occur during the struggle. Carver told these stories in ways that people who had experienced them, or knew someone
who had, could understand. Carver did not clutter his pages with massive detail, but chose only the right details. Carver wanted to write of the problems of the American experience from the perspective of one's neighbor, the mailman, or the waitress that had served lunch earlier in the day. He wanted to show us these people and their world but also to communicate with them. As Carver himself once said, "Art is a linking between people, the creator and the consumer. Art is not self-expression, it is communication, and I am interested in communication" (Nesset 103). Whether or not that makes him a minimalist is debatable; however, we are sure that Raymond Carver is a humanist.

Many say if Carver had a musical brother, that man would be Bruce Springsteen. During the 1984 Presidential Campaign, Ronald Reagan cited Springsteen’s hit song, "Born in the USA," while discussing the working world, morals, and values our country should stand for. Springsteen was outraged by Reagan's use of him and his song in his speech. Like Carver, Springsteen was an advocate of the working-class and felt during his time in office, Reagan had done nothing but hurt the blue-collar American. Springsteen’s lyrics are similar in ways to the short stories of Carver, displaying the gritty reality that very few have the ability to show.

Friday night’s pay night guys fresh out of work 
Talking about the weekend scrubbing off the dirt 
Some heading home to their families some looking to get hurt 
Some going down to Stovell wearing trouble on their shirts  
I work for the county out on 95

All day I hold a red flag and watch the traffic pass me by  
In my head I keep a picture of a pretty little miss 
Someday mister I’m gonna lead a better life than this (Springsteen 48).

Their words tell stories we can see ourselves in, talk of places we have been, and talk of pains we have felt. However, in an interview with Charlie Rose, in December 1998, Springsteen said something that may link him with Carver most closely of all. When asked about writing and why he writes, Springsteen said, "Writing is an attempt to sorting things out" (Rose).
Much of what Raymond Carver wrote about, was “an attempt to sorting things out” (Rose). Carver attempted to sort things out at a time when the Reaganites felt that they needed no sorting. Embracing the falsity of the eighties, many people felt that America was fine. The American Dream was live and well, even though 11.5 million people lost jobs, or even that 33 million were considered poor (Johnson 451). Reagan and his administration had a way of talking to the people, telling them everything would work out, that success for both the nation and the individual were definite. However, with his sorting out, Carver did as few writers before him were able to do. Carver spoke to the same people who were listening to Reagan, yet they were hearing a different story, a story made up of what they were experiencing now, instead of what they were told they should, could, and would experience. “Carver’s figures take American disappointment to its barest extreme, haunted as they are by unfulfillable, intangible longings, paralyzed, lost, pushed well beyond the verge of articulate dismay” (Nesset 3).

In a sense, Carver was sorting out the American Dream. Yet he was sorting it out to the people who needed to hear it most. Carver created the identification that so many working-class people searched for but were unable to achieve time after time. By the time Cathedral was written, Carver had shown Americans that the American Dream they have been told to invest so much time in is not a total farce, but not necessarily the same for everyone. People are not destined for the same fortunes. Bill and Arlene Miller may find happiness one day, but they will never reach the same heights as their neighbors, the Stones. Yet the narrator in “Cathedral” may turn out to be something more than expected. Carver shows us that change can happen and that it can happen when we least expect it. Oftentimes the strangest of people teach us the most valuable of lessons.

Without a doubt, a great deal of lost hope exists in the world, and Carver spent many of his writing days dramatizing the issue of hopelessness. But he also showed us that change is not impossible. “He [Carver] brings this picture out in ways that disarm us, revealing it in a medium whose uncanny power, for all its deceptive simplicity, its
intangibility, its uniqueness, is anything but minimal" (Nesset 31). Carver accomplishes this end with many of the devices that help to define minimalism, but to refer to his effects as minimal would be leaving a great deal out.

Thus, where does Raymond Carver stand in terms of American literary history? Is he the best short story writer of his time? Or, is he merely the best minimalist writer? Or, is Raymond Carver simply an unique voice. In the mind of Carver none of these claims would have made much difference. Raymond Carver was more than a writer; if anything, he was a teacher. Carver did not want merely to write stories for people to read, but to create stories to move people. Carver wanted his words to give people something to identify and communicate with. As acclaimed Carver biographer William Stull said in the foreword of Carver’s No Heroics Please, “He [Carver] wanted readers to be ‘moved, and maybe even a little haunted. But he also wanted to ‘shrive’ his readers—a beautiful old biblical word meaning to ‘be at scribe,’ ‘hear the confession of,’ but also to ‘give absolution to’ a person, to ‘purge’ ” (No Heroics Please 12). Further, his work was based on the same things he was hoping to teach. He wanted his art to not only touch his readers, but work its way into their lives. “Ray was making his art, but it involved him in the methods of absolution, hearing and telling. He trusted that if he managed this truly enough it would carry into the lives of his readers” (No Heroics Please 12).

Through his various collections of short stories, essays, and in his poems, Raymond Carver sorted out the American Dream by teaching us what counts in life. Carver never spoke out adamantly against what was happening during the time of his stories. He did not make bold political statements or work in obvious views and opinions. Instead, he taught us through exquisite detail and human experiences what really counts in a mixed-up world: “... we draw instruction from his noticing, his respect for ‘vivid depiction of place,’ ‘demonic intensity,’ and his awareness of ‘what counts’: ‘Love, death, dreams, ambition, growing up, coming to terms with your own and other people’s limitations” (No Heroics Please 13).
Carver told his audience about what counts so they would not be left in the dark. During the eighties, many people thought that by speaking only of the sunny-side of America, we would soon forget about the darker side. If people were told to work hard, to make as much money as possible no matter what they had to do, then everything would be taken care of. If people invested their hearts and minds in Reagan’s Inaugural Address, and his words of optimism, strength, enterprise, inventiveness, and most importantly, success, then Bill and Arlene Miller would never have to worry about locking the keys in their neighbor’s apartment (Johnson 13).

“‘Good fiction,’ as he [Carver] puts it even more vividly, ‘is partly a bringing of the news from one world to another’” (Nesset 102). Raymond Carver was in no way telling his readers not to dream, just to beware of limitations. Although Ronald Reagan and the rest of the world were telling Americans to dream a certain dream, that dream had a dark side, and people were reluctant to talk about the limitations. “A crucial function of Carver’s storytelling is bringing the news of an especially formidable darkness into the light, begging if not for antidotes then at least for our recognition of that darker world’s existence” (Nesset 102-103). The way Carver was able to relay this message was unmatched. He had an uncanny way of telling us stories, bringing us news, and sorting things out all at the same time. “It’s impossible to do it the way he did it. The best you can do is learn from it and develop your own voice and style from it . . . “ (Halpert 141).

I think his work will stand very highly as a successor. I mean he represents in a way a renewal of the American realist tradition. He is an inheritor of Hemingway, an inheritor of Sherwood Anderson. His work is very good and very rewarding. People will always want to read him to get an insight onto the life and art of late-twentieth-century America. He has an international reputation. I think he will stand high (Halpert 131).

As Robert Stone says of his friend and his friend’s work, “People will always want to read him to get an insight into the life and art of the late-twentieth century America . . . he will stand high” (Halpert 131). Carver’s life and work started out in the “rag and bone shop of the heart” (Nesset 103). He started out telling us about the hardships and misfortunes that go along with being not only an American, but human. Carver showed us
the darker side of the American experience, but with it, showed us that with time, hope can triumph. "Reaching deep, he draws out in painstaking detail the implications of a painful, collective, captivity, and if he fails to move us to action he certainly moves us, as he has moved his characters of these stories, to reflection, to inventory, and, if we are careful and lucky, to understanding" (Nesset 103). Raymond Carver was a prophet of our country’s people, a voice calling for identification, communication, and at times comfort. Carver showed us the value in the small experience and the power of the struggle. Most of all, though, Raymond Carver taught us what counts: that no matter where we live, what we do, or what dream we may have, we share a flawed humanity. Carver himself put it best: “the best stories of our time, throw some light on what it is that makes us and keeps us, often against great odds, recognizably human” (Nesset 103).
Bibliography


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