

“HEAR THE HUMAN NOISE”: ANALYSING RAYMOND CARVER’S SHORT FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The short stories of Raymond Carver, an essentially underrated writer, chart a forgotten yet significant trajectory of American fiction. Understanding Carver is recognizing the elementary struggles of a lower middle class American family and the sheer determination to succeed in the creative world. His short stories are flashes of immediacy bringing home the ideas of penury, listlessness, failure of communication, unemployment and physical and emotional tragedy. Reflecting the harrowingly mundane or absurdly chaotic other side of the global superpower America, Carver’s short fiction is often associated with the term “dirty realism”. It should be further noted that the features corresponding to this particular term such as literary minimalism, colloquialism of language, lack of psychological introspection in characters were denounced as superficial and non-literary by the critics. In a nation dominated by literary giants like Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow and others, Carver’s unembellished prose portray a stark reference point to contemporary reality. Through my paper I would like to evaluate the dominant themes as well as the plethora of interesting characters which he creates in his short stories.

KEYWORDS: Raymond Carver, Short Story, Domestic, Relationships, Love, Disillusionment

INTRODUCTION

Raymond Carver is a comparatively lesser known name in the canon of American literature. In the super continent whose literature is dominated by giants like Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow, Thomas Pynchon and others, Carver charts an underrated yet seminal trajectory of American fiction, that of the short story. Carver situates himself firmly within a tradition of short fiction that originated in the oral tradition and was modernized by Poe’s aesthetic patterning in the middle of the nineteenth century and then not sufficiently documented in the cultural space of American literature. His name is synonymous with the renaissance of the American short story and providing a fresh perspective and voice to a hitherto ignored and submerged population.

Whereas, the work of writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme and others embodies the explosive contradictions of the 1960s in all its fragmentation, surrealism and carnival atmosphere, Carver embodies the muted mood of America in the 1970s. The 70s were a time of widespread cultural malaise in America, a moment when the great collective promise of the New World appeared to be failing. “The embattled, heroic self-assertion of a Pynchon proves impossible to sustain, instead literary art turns to an immersion in the ordinary...” (Lainsbury 8). Carver’s literary world is filled with these so called ordinary people grappling with an essentially ordinary world which nevertheless still finds necessary ammunition to befuddle them. “Post war Americans were told to put their faith in materialism, and when prosperity began to wane, they found they had no spiritual resources to sustain them.” (Lainsbury 9).

Carver's short fiction hints at this acute spiritual disillusionment and the more tangible forms affecting the social fabric- poverty, unemployment, disenfranchisement, hopelessness and ensuing alcoholism. James Atlas in his review of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* states, "The barren idiom of our time is an idiom of refusal, a repudiation of the idea of greatness." (Atlas 98). In fact, this was what some of the critics of Carver complained about; that all he accomplishing was projecting to the rest of the world the terrible condition of most of the people living in America thereby destabilising the myth of America as the supreme nation of infinite bliss. Frank Lentricchia dismisses Carver's art as "a minor, apolitical, domestic fiction of the triumphs and agonies of autonomous private individuals operating the private sector." He argues that the main line of American literature from Emerson to Pynchon and DeLillo is political while the domestic realism of Carver represents "the soft humanist underbelly of American literature." (Lainsbury 2-3). Carver deliberately disassociates himself from the so called political literature and instead focuses on the politics framing everyday life. In fact, in his interviews with John Alton, he vehemently refuses to be regarded as an intellectual and a political commentator.

Carver's choice of the short story as an effective tool of writing fiction is a deliberate decision. In one of his interviews he states:

...So I suppose I was drawn to the form, and I mean the brevity, of both poetry and short fiction from the beginning. Also, poetry and short fiction seemed to be things I could get done in a reasonable period of time. When I started out as a writer, I was moving around a lot, and there were daily distractions, weird jobs, family responsibilities. My life seemed very fragile, so I wanted to be able to start something that I felt I had a reasonable chance of seeing my way through to finish which meant I needed to finish things in a hurry, a short period of time... (McCaffery 238).

Carver's choice of the short story as the predominant mode of creative expression was not an indulgence but a compulsion. The short story is best suited to express the "desperate" situation of the characters which frequent his fiction. In the same interview he talks about inhabiting the same desperate living conditions and identifying with the financial and moral obligations and responsibilities of this "very populous sub stratum of American life." Kasia Boddy writes "Carver renounces the integration and casual narrative structure of the traditional novel in favour of the open-endedness and indeterminacy of the short story as a means of expressing the experience of sheer accident that dominates the lives of his protagonists." (108). The pithiness of short story, thus, becomes an elaborate metaphor coinciding with the inevitable brevity of the contemporary American life and all the paraphernalia associated with it. In a similar vein, this paper would try to examine Carver's second short story collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* which received nationwide adulation especially for its conciseness which eventually led to Carver being associated with the phenomenon of literary minimalism which he, however, loathed as an unwholesome and vexing "tag".

...in retrospect he found the pared-down story texts aesthetically unsatisfying, especially after reviewers began dubbing him a literary "minimalist." The connotations of the word troubled him. "There's something about 'minimalist' that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don't like," he told Mona Simpson. (Stull 70).

As the title suggests, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, is, ultimately about love. Each of the stories in this collection deals with a specific experience of love having either positive or negative connotations.

Inalienably associated with love is the idea of marriage, familial ties and domesticity. In Carver's disgruntled universe, however, love is hardly a liberating influence. Mostly it nosedives into claustrophobic inescapable scenarios branching further into tragedy. Marriage is equivalent to a nationwide malady, an unavoidable epidemic which grips every individual at random phases of one's life. "Residing in the form of hardscrabble domesticity, Carver's marriages are thus scaled-down models representing larger, rather more terrifying politics-or anti-politics: models reflecting, in human form, the arbitrariness and caprice and chaos of the world in which they are rooted." (Nesset 294).

One of the initial explorations into the politics of marriage is through the house/home dichotomy. In the very first story "Why Don't You Dance?" the readers are introduced to a yard sale occurring simultaneously with the breakdown of marriage. As the husband piles items intimately associated with the marital life on to his yard, that is, outside the domestic sphere, the 'home' transforms into a mere 'house'. Mention should also be made of the exquisite detail with which Carver describes the scene in which mundane images conform into sustaining metaphors. "The bed" associated with the idea of 'home' is significant in this aspect. The husband reminisces about "his side, her side" and is finally relieved when "all the stuff was out of the house". The breakdown of a relationship is immediately juxtaposed with the beginning of one in which a pair of newlyweds act as voyeurs to this infinitely unspoken drama and enter the scene with all their naiveté, "The girl sat on the bed. She pushed off her shoes and lay back. She thought she could see a star." (Carver 4). The heartrending optimism of the "star" will eventually topple down into despair and the cyclical pattern will keep on continuing.

Another significant theme is the breakdown of communication. Language and its insufficiency is a major concern in Carver's stories. Mostly the characters are unable to express what they want to say, the dialogues hang in mid air lending an ominous gloom to the scene. Carver had spoken about the palpability of the scenes in one of his interviews. This particular linguistic lack, thus, becomes a predominant device to provide a touch of realism to the fiction.

They talk, however unsuccessfully... They employ both their bodies and tongues in efforts to find themselves again, struggling to reassemble the bits and pieces of their tattered identities-and they continue struggling, even as their bodies get them into trouble, and as their tongues, taking them forever in circles, fall silent. (Nesset 295).

One of the most beautiful explorations of the inherent inarticulation of human beings is presented in the story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" in which, two couples engage in a conversation about love. It is significant to note that none of the individuals are in fact in a position to offer an actual definition of what exactly love means to him or her. Being educated and accomplished, each of the four feel they are capable of evocating their own idea of the truest and the most selfless form of love by providing examples from their own lives.

The more these characters talk about love, the less they feel they know, so that rather than moving towards understanding, they are eased by the growing darkness and the guzzled alcohol into nearly stupefied befuddlement. Yet witnessing the process leads the reader, remarkably, to genuine insight. (Stonehill 76).

This particular short story is also a representation of the act of storytelling itself. Each of the four characters transforms into short term narrators and even interrupts and adds on to the flow of narratives. The readers are introduced to different expressions of love either through possessive insanity or indivisible companionship, self-annihilating violence or

self-sustaining togetherness. The vehemence of the opinions shadow the imprecision of the words as the conversation eventually drips down to ineffectual small talk. The story ends with the most famous quote of Raymond Carver, “I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone’s heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark.” (129). The pseudo debate on love remains unresolved because language is ultimately dismally unequipped to explain and analyse the enormity of the simple sound of a beating heart.

A predominant image related to marriage, relationship and family is that of the baby. Two stories in the collection appear one after the other and are illuminating in their positioning. “Popular Mechanics” is a mere two and a half page story depicting the quarrel between a husband and wife. The sparseness of the story is directly proportional to the sudden horrifying end. The husband is in the process of leaving home and the wife is distraught. Suddenly the attention veers towards the baby and what ensues is a tug of war with the baby as the prize. The story ends with the shocking lines “She caught the baby around the wrist and leaned back... He felt the baby slipping out of his hands and pulled back very hard. In this manner, the issue was decided.” (105). The baby can be assumed to be a symbolic representation of the diminishing past which neither of them want to lose as well as the future which might be an escape from the desperate conditions. The baby can also mean an object to possess in order to authenticate their respective egos.

The baby, as the point of discord is also present in the next story “Everything Stuck To Him”. This story is the only heartwarming story providing a glimpse of harmony and happiness in an otherwise bleak world. This story also has the most number of autobiographical references. It shows a father recounting a particular episode of his youth to his grown-up daughter. The father is wary about launching on the post of the narrator because he feels her attention might waver. What follows is a poignant slice of domesticity where a pair of teenage husband and wife is struggling with their baby girl. As opposed to the previous story, the tone is infinitely more optimistic and the baby is the source of bliss, however short-lived it might be. The mundane struggles of the young couple accelerate when the baby suddenly falls ill leading to a high drama lover’s tiff with the hero stomping out of the house. Immediately, however, he returns to find his wife and child peacefully asleep. The main reason of the discord, thus, rendered moot, he enters into a compromise and she into a heartfelt apology, “They had laughed. They had leaned on each other and laughed until the tears come” (113).

CONCLUSIONS

Reading Raymond Carver is an attempt to comprehend the subtleties of human experience. His short narratives provide an excellent framework where interactions or the lack of those carry the story forward. Carver’s short stories are an attempt to evoke the inevitable monotony which characterizes the daily lives of ordinary people or the propensity for violence which each is capable of. Love in its most basic, unadorned and fundamental form is explored in this particular collection. Love is expressed neither through elaborate gestures nor perfectly articulate speeches but through the candid image of a young couple watching the street together or a simple line like, “Come... sit with me”. Carver’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* is finally a direct question posed to the readers to enumerate and if possible elucidate all the innumerable things attached to the exploration of something so elemental and as essentially complicated as love.

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