When We Talk About Raymond Carver: Experiencing Two Versions of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*

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By

Shelby R. Sleevi, B.A.

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INTRODUCTION

THE STRANGE CASE OF RAYMOND CARVER:
TEXTS, CONTEXTS, AND THE RHETORICAL APPROACH TO NARRATIVE

“I was going to tell you about something. I mean, I was going to prove a point. You see, this happened a few months ago, but it’s still going on right now, and it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we’re talking about when we talk about love.”

- Mel McGinnis, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”

“I wanted to tell you about something that happened a while back. I think I wanted to prove a point, and I will if I can just tell this thing the way it happened. This happened a few months ago, but it’s still going on right now. You might say that, yeah. But it ought to make us all feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we were talking about, when we talk about love.”

- Herb McGinnis, “Beginners”

Though he’d passed away over twenty years before, 2009 could reasonably be called the Year of Raymond Carver. Within several months of one another, two items were published that profoundly affected the way readers thought about the long-time poster child for literary “minimalism”: the Library of America series’ volume of Carver’s Collected Stories, and an expansive first biography on the author by Carol Sklenicka. The Collected Stories presented the entirety of Carver’s short fiction, the genre for which he was known best and widely praised. The biography offered readers a thorough look into Carver’s life, from his birth to poor parents in rural Oregon to his untimely death of lung cancer in Port Angeles fifty years later. Thus, Carver’s 2009 re-emergence occurred on not one, but two fronts: through his texts, his writings themselves, as well as his contexts, the biographical history out of which those texts came.
While coming from these arguably different angles, both the *Collected Stories* and the Sklenicka biography contained definitive accounts of what had only partially surfaced before their publication: the controversy surrounding the genesis of Carver’s second full collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (*WWTA*).

Published in 1981, *WWTA* offered a striking alternative to the maximalist “excesses” of many of the mid-20th century’s other American authors, such as Thomas Pynchon or John Barth. Many scholars came to regard *WWTA* as the quintessential example of “minimalist” short fiction, closely tied to the Hemingway tradition in its omission and indeterminacy. As stated in the preface to Ewing Campbell’s *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction*, “truncation is what caught the critics’ attention in Raymond Carver’s second commercial collection of fiction and earned the author his celebrity status as America’s premiere minimalist writer” (Campbell 32).

This “truncation,” along with what Randolph Runyon calls “a prevailing absence, a silence, an empty space between the lines that his texts invite us to fill” (Runyon 1), became the very trademarks of the “Carveresque” and set the standard for the minimalist method. Written in “spare, colloquial prose” (Sklenicka ix), the stories in *WWTA* brimmed with tumultuous subject matter—the working-class poor struggling to make ends meet, families threatened by infidelity and alcoholism, helpless characters on the verge of mental and emotional breakdowns—and often left readers with a powerful sense of despairing irresolution. In a review for *The Atlantic* that was less-than-entirely appraising, James Atlas admitted of the stories that “their very minimality” gave them “a certain bleak power” (Stull and Carroll 973).
However, recently published contextual information has vastly complicated our understanding of this collection and its author. As we now know, Gordon Lish, the famed *Esquire* and Knopf editor, was the reason behind what can be seen in retrospect as a relative difference of *WWTA* from the rest of Carver’s oeuvre: by the calculations of William Stull and Maureen Carroll, the editors of the Library of America’s *Collected Stories*, Lish cut Carver’s original manuscript of this collection by over half of its original length. Thus, while the stories in *WWTA* garnered Carver both popular and critical success, they were, unbeknownst to his general readership, quite different from those he had originally written and intended to have published.

Although the two had successfully collaborated on the earlier collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), Carver was unhappy with Lish’s extreme edits to *WWTA* and requested that publication of the collection be stopped. Ultimately, as we well know from the literary history detailed above, the book was published in its drastically shortened form, presenting a version of Raymond Carver to the world that the author himself had not intended. After Carver split from Lish’s influence in 1983, restored versions of several of his original *WWTA* stories began to appear in literary magazines, often to critical acclaim. Carver’s next full collection, *Cathedral* (1983), included a full-length restoration of the story “A Small, Good Thing” (the title of which had been changed to “The Bath” by Lish for *WWTA*), which Irving Howe’s *New York Times Book Review* declared to be a “better story” than the shorter version first published (Stull and Carroll 974). Bold judgments like these spurred great interest in
comparing the original and edited versions of Carver’s texts, and yielded a considerable amount of scholarship on the topic.

The 2009 publication of the entire WWTA manuscript—entitled Beginners by the Collected Stories’ editors after Carver’s title for the narrative that became the title story of the published collection—has reinvigorated the scholarly impulse to compare these texts. The stories in the manuscript have further complicated readers’ perceptions of Carver’s style in both form and content, and Stull and Carroll’s decision to include them in the Collected Stories—apparently at the behest of Carver’s widow, Tess Gallagher—was met with mixed reactions. Stephen King’s New York Times Book Review viewed the move as “a welcome and necessary corrective,” and more or less vilified Lish for his obtrusive and “ultimately poisonous” influence on Carver’s career (King 10). Conversely, Giles Harvey’s The New York Review of Books piece, “The Two Raymond Carvers,” argued that the manuscript was “twice as long as What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” and “about half as interesting” (Harvey 38). Unlike King, Harvey found Carver’s original text to be “dense with sentimentality and melodrama,” and praised Lish for sensing “a leaner, quieter, more agile book trapped inside the manuscript” (Harvey 38).

Additional fuel for this debate was provided by the more personal items included in the Collected Stories and Sklenicka’s biography: letters from Carver’s correspondence with Lish. One letter in particular, reproduced in full in both volumes, is especially troubling. Written almost immediately after he’d read Lish’s final edits, the nearly-five-page letter shows an anguished Carver who is desperate to stop publication
by any means. He begs Lish for more time, offering to pay whatever that might entail financially. An excerpt from the letter reads:

I think I had best pull out, Gordon, before it goes any further. I realize I stand every chance of losing your love and friendship over this. But I strongly feel I stand every chance of losing my soul and my mental health over it, if I don’t take that risk. I’m still in the process of recovery and trying to get well from the alcoholism, and I just can’t take any chances, something as momentous and permanent as this, that would put my head in some jeopardy. (Stull and Carroll 995)

After several more pages, which include details as to which stories he could “live with and be happy with” and those he couldn’t “let go of in their entirety” (Stull and Carroll 994-995), Carver closes the letter with a plea: “Please do the necessary things to stop production of this book. Please try and forgive me, this breach” (996). Though neither the Collected Stories nor the biography contains much of Lish’s response to Carver, both quote him as telling the New York Times Magazine, “My sense of it was that there was a letter and that I just went ahead” (Stull and Carroll 997).

This story, about what transpired between Raymond Carver and his editor to produce a volume that did indeed turn out to be “momentous,” has provoked a wide variety of reactions and judgments from scholars, critics, literary historians and biographers, and the members of Carver’s general readership. Moreover, it has become a touchstone case for genetic studies, exemplifying the complications that might be at work between authors, editors, and other collaborators throughout the writing process.
But in the wake of this controversial story, there are other stories at stake: the narratives that Carver originally intended to be part of *WWTA*, which differ greatly from those the literary community has for so long associated with his name. In this thesis, my aim is to analyze these manuscript narratives in order to determine how their effects—on meaning, and on the interpretive, aesthetic, and ethical judgments that help to shape that meaning—differ from the effects of the heavily-edited stories first published. This project will entail a close look at what is different between the published and manuscript versions, from the most obvious discrepancies to some of the more subtle.

In exploring the differences between these narratives, I aim to let the texts speak for themselves rather than imposing aspects of the context detailed above upon them. As is obvious from its complicated publication history, associating particular attributes of *WWTA*’s form and content with Raymond Carver the flesh-and-blood author is problematic. This problem highlights the issue of authorship and intentionality, long discussed in literary studies and notably addressed by such thinkers as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. An additional perspective on this issue, one that separates the real author from the text while retaining the idea of intentionality, comes from the field of narrative theory: the concept of the “implied author.”

When Wayne Booth coined the term “implied author” in 1961, he explained that every fiction creates:

…an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage-manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails. This implied author is always distinct from the ‘real man’—
whatever we may take him to be—who creates a superior version of himself as he creates his work; any successful novel makes us believe in an ‘author’ who amounts to a kind of ‘second self’…usually a highly refined and selected version, wiser, more sensitive, more perceptive than any real man could be.

(Booth 143)

For Booth, the implied author is a sort of “ideal” version of the actual author created by that actual author. Booth goes on to specify that the implied author can be distant from the narrator, the other characters, and the audience of his or her work in a number of ways: intellectually, temporally, morally, and so on.

In Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (1978), Seymour Chatman expands on and revises Booth’s concept, stating that the implied author can only be “reconstructed by the reader from the narrative” (Chatman 162). The implied author is not to be confused with the narrator, but is “the principle that invented the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative, that stacked the cards in this particular way, had these things happen to these characters, in these words or images” (Chatman 162). Chatman adds that “We can grasp the notion of implied author most clearly by comparing different narratives written by the same real author but presupposing different implied authors,” and that, even when a work is the product of collaboration, “there is always an implied author” (Chatman 163)—a singular impression of a creator behind the text.

My own understanding of this concept is more in line with Chatman than Booth, as the implied author I’ll be referring to is the portrait we construct of a figure
responsible for the creation of the text. This construction comes from our sense of whoever put the narrative together once we have finished reading it: that particular author’s style, aesthetics, and rhetorical purpose (to be discussed in greater depth shortly). This implied author is not, as both Booth and Chatman make clear, the same as the real, flesh-and-blood author, even though we may use that individual’s surname to refer to him or her.¹

The concept of the implied author, as defined above, is a helpful way to distance the flesh-and-blood Raymond Carver from the texts attributed to him while still retaining the notion of intended communication. The word “communication,” as I use it here, is in accordance with what James Phelan outlines in Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration (2005) as a “rhetorical theory of narrative,” which proposes that narrative be thought of as a “rhetorical act”: that is, “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (Phelan 18). Phelan’s view assumes that something is being communicated by narrative—that a particular message is being transmitted through every text—and that in fiction, this communication is doubled: on one track, the narrator communicates to his or her audience for his or her purposes, and on the other track, the implied author communicates to his or her audience for his or her purposes.

Phelan’s conception of narrative posits “that texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways, that those designs are conveyed through the

¹ In the chapters that follow, I will often refer to the different versions of the texts in question as the “Lish” or “Carver” versions for ease of distinction. However, these surnames always denote implied rather than actual authors of the texts.
language, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as the
genres and conventions readers use to understand them” (Phelan 18). This rhetorical
framework entails participation from the recipient of this communication, as well; as
Phelan explains, it consists of:

…multileveled communication from author to audience, one that involves the
audience’s intellect, emotions, psyche and values… Our values and those set
forth by the narrator and the implied author affect our judgments of characters
(and sometimes narrators) and our judgments affect our emotions. The trajectory
of our feelings is itself linked to the psychological, thematic, and, as we shall
see, ethical dimensions of the narrative. (19)

Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative provides one way to help identify differences in
what is communicated to us by the two versions of WWTA, as, presumably, the
differences will alter our perceptions of the implied authors responsible for sending
these messages. However, the idea that this narrative communication occurs on two
tracks—originating from both the narrator and the implied author—begs a clarification
of the term “us” as I’ve been using it thus far.

In Peter Rabinowitz’s “Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences”
(1977), he makes the important distinction between the “narrative” and “authorial”
audiences, both of which are different from the actual flesh-and-blood readers of a text.
The narrative audience—distinct from what Gerald Prince has termed the “narratee,”
the figure to whom a narrator might be speaking directly—is the “imaginary audience” to whom the world of the novel is not a fiction, but a “real” set of people and events (Rabinowitz 127). The “authorial audience,” on the other hand, is the audience who understands all the implied author is trying to communicate and who remains covertly aware that it is reading a synthetic construction—one crafted by someone who is attempting communicate a particular message through his or her text. This authorial audience—situated as the recipient of what the implied author is communicating—is the one denoted by “us,” unless otherwise specified.

Here, then, is the “communication model” of narrative, first developed by Chatman and updated in light of Rabinowitz’s work on audiences. The communication that occurs within the narrative text appears inside the box, while the real author (“RA”) and real reader (“RR”) are positioned outside of it:

![Communication Model Diagram]

Looking at a story such as “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” as it was published in 1981, and from which the first epigraph of this introduction is taken, we can see how this multilayered communication occurs. This story features two married couples—Mel and Terri, and their guests Nick and Laura—who sit around a table for several hours drinking gin and sharing their various experiences of romantic relationships. Since the characters do not move from the table during this narrative,

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This concept, discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, varies in usefulness from one analysis of narrative to another.
what “happens” as the story progresses has much more to do with communication than
with plot. As the four characters communicate with one another through quoted
dialogue, our narrator, Nick, communicates to his narrative audience—the members of
which believe the world he inhabits with his fellow characters is real. Though we can
willingly suspend our disbelief in order to join the narrative audience, we are
simultaneously aware that we are reading a story crafted by an overall creator: the
figure we have identified as the implied author. Ultimately, we hold this implied author
responsible for everything that happens to his fictional characters, as well as for what
we perceive to be the characteristics—both positive and negative—of Nick’s narration.
To be sure, we do not conflate Nick’s views and rhetorical choices with those of his
implied creator, but we do understand that creator to have made specific choices in
portraying this narrator—as well as the story he narrates—in this particular way.

A further distinction here—between “story” and “discourse”—is helpful in
working through the intricacies inherent in any act of narrative communication. As
Chatman explains in *Story and Discourse*, the “story” is the content plane of a narrative
structure, and the “discourse” is its expression plane (Chatman 161). The story level
concerns the aspects of a narrative that have to do with the story being told—the plot,
the characters, and what happens to them. In the narrative discussed above, then, the
story level would include anything that takes place in the fictional world of Nick, Laura,
Terri, and Mel: their surroundings, the sequence of narrative events in which they take
part, and the conversation that occurs between them. The “discourse” level, on the other
hand, concerns those aspects of a narrative that have to do with the *telling* of that
story—the way these characters and events are communicated to us. This level would encompass what happens on both tracks of narrative communication previously discussed: the Nick to narrative audience track, and the implied author to authorial audience track.

As I hope to show, this distinction between the story and discourse levels will be necessary in order to get a full sense of just how much was changed through Lish’s edits. To distinguish “unstable relations” on the level of the story from those of the discourse, I will be using Phelan’s terms, “instabilities” and “tensions,” respectively. As Phelan explains in *Reading People, Reading Plots* (1989), tensions and instabilities are key concepts for understanding the workings of narrative progression: the “movement” of a narrative, Phelan writes, is “given shape and direction by the way in which an author introduces, complicates, and resolves (or fails to resolve) certain instabilities which are the developing focus of the authorial audience’s interest in the narrative” (15).

As mentioned earlier, the experience of narrative as rhetoric also entails a reader to make judgments based on his or her ethical positioning within and outside of the narrative at hand. In *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (2007), Phelan explains that ethical judgments in narrative “include not only the ones we make about the characters and their actions but also those we make about the ethics of storytelling itself, especially the ethics of the implied author’s relation to the narrator, the characters, and the audience” (Phelan 12). This “ethics of the telling,” as Phelan calls it, includes what he identifies as “the ethics of rhetorical
“purpose” (12). According to this theory, when we read, our judgments of an implied author are based partially on what we perceive to be his or her ethical responsibility toward the other parties involved in the act of narrative communication. Moreover, these ethical judgments can complicate our aesthetic appreciation of a work—and vice versa. While my goal here is not to judge one implied author’s ethics as ultimately better or worse than those of the other, I do think asking the question of why each seems to be constructing a narrative—what the rhetorical purpose behind such disclosure might be—is useful in coming to a sense of the those implied authors’ identities.

Though admittedly complicated, this narrative-theory based approach is most effective for understanding the textual complexities brought on by this very complicated contextual situation. If these different versions of WWTA create radically different implied authors—each communicating his or her own distinctive message and values—the experiences of reading these collections will be radically different, as well. And in the strange, perhaps anomalous case of Raymond Carver, I would argue that these kinds of discrepancies call for a reevaluation of the characteristics we might typically associate with his work.

In Chapter One, I will compare “The Bath” and “A Small, Good Thing,” two versions of the “same” narrative that display notable differences in form as well as content. Chapter Two will focus on the treatment and representation of female characters in both versions of this collection, and Chapter Three will address the differences and implications of these texts’ portrayal of lower-middle-class experience. Finally, in a brief conclusion, I will return to several of the contextual issues raised in
this introduction—for, if we claim that these texts can “tell us about something,” we ought to allow what they tell us to speak back to their contexts, as well.
Saturday afternoon the mother drove to the bakery in the shopping center. After looking through a loose-leaf binder with photographs of cakes taped onto the pages, she ordered chocolate, the child’s favorite. The cake she chose was decorated with a spaceship and a launching pad under a sprinkling of white stars. The name SCOTTY would be iced on in green as if it were the name of the spaceship. (Carver 251)

So begins “The Bath,” the seventh story in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love as it was published in 1981. Composed of thirteen “scenes” separated by line breaks, the narrative is told by a heterodiegetic narrator through focalization that shifts between two main characters, a wife and her husband. After deciding on the cake described above, the “mother”—who is not given a name until several pages into the narrative—and the baker share a brief conversation:

…she gave the baker her name and her telephone number. The cake would be ready Monday morning, in plenty of time for the party Monday afternoon. This was all the baker was willing to say. No pleasantries, just this small exchange, the barest information, nothing that was not necessary. (251)

Just as the baker gives his customer the sparsest information possible, this opening does not betray much of what lurks in the short narrative to follow. Like many other stories from WWTA, “The Bath” is composed of short sentences, brief
descriptions, and minimal detail, and features a truncated, indeterminate ending. The characters at the mercy of this narrative situation are in a perpetual state of confusion and disconnectedness and undergo multiple failed attempts to get close to and understand each other. The narrator, too, takes part in the practice of minimal disclosure, giving very little information as to what the characters see, think, or feel at any given time. When taken together, these qualities make for a disorienting narrative experience on both the story and discourse levels—an experience that is markedly different from that of reading Carver’s original version, as the comparison in the second half of this chapter will show.

Despite what seems like a fairly neutral opening sequence, it doesn’t take long for “The Bath” to take a turn for the bleak. At the bottom of the first page, the “birthday boy” is struck by a hit-and-run driver on the way to school, and is forced to spend the duration of the story unconscious in the hospital. It is here that we first encounter the boy’s father—unnamed for the entirety of the story—who has come to wait with his wife for Scotty to wake up from what appears to be some kind of coma. When the father returns home to take a bath a few hours later, he receives a phone call from the baker, who is unhappily in possession of a cake that was never picked up or paid for; the father asserts that he doesn’t “know anything about it” and hangs up the phone, but it rings again when he is in the bathtub:

He got himself out and hurried through the house, saying, “Stupid, stupid,” because he wouldn’t be doing this if he’d stayed where he was in the hospital.

He picked up the receiver and shouted, “Hello!”
The voice said, “It’s ready.” (252-253)

While we are not told so explicitly, we assume this call is also from the baker, and suspect that this might not be the last the family hears from him. Thus, an instability is developed early on at the level of the story: between these prank phone calls and his unfriendly behavior in the opening scene, the baker is established as an antagonistic character whose presence serves primarily to complicate what is already a painfully complicated situation.

Additional instabilities develop as the couple struggles to understand what is wrong with Scotty. It seems that no one at the hospital can give the mother and father a straight answer; when a doctor stops by to assess the boy’s status, he remarks vaguely that it is “Nothing to shout about, but nothing to worry about. He should wake up pretty soon” (254). When the mother presses him as to whether or not the boy is in a coma, the doctor merely says, “I wouldn’t call it that” (254), shakes their hands, and leaves them alone to continue the wait. Interestingly, in this exchange of dialogue, the doctor calls the mother by her first name—“Ann”—and in doing so, divulges the first and only character name we will get in the story (254).

As the couple continues to wait with their unresponsive son, our sense of their anxiety for his recovery is heightened, as well as a sense that the accident has put a strain on the health of their relationship with each other. In one of the few moments where we are provided with internal goings-on, the husband worries about what he can do to comfort his wife:
He wanted to say something else. But there was no saying what it should be. He took her hand and put it in his lap. This made him feel better. It made him feel he was saying something. They sat like that for a while, watching the boy, not talking. From time to time he squeezed her hand until she took it away.

“I’ve been praying,” she said.

“Me too,” the father said. “I’ve been praying too.” (254-255)

These few moments of seeming togetherness signal what could be a hopeful turn in the narrative, but the next scene brings yet another dose of destabilizing bad news. A new doctor comes in to take Scotty to a lower floor for “more pictures” as well as a “scan”—without giving the parents a clear explanation as to why—and leaves them to wait alone overnight (255). When the boy is brought back up the next morning, the maddening repetition becomes too much for the couple to handle:

They waited all day. They boy did not wake up. The doctor came again and examined the boy again after saying the same things again. Nurses came in. Doctors came in. A technician came in and took blood.

“I don’t understand this,” the mother said to the technician.

“Doctor’s orders,” the technician said. (255)

The parents’ perpetual inability to understand what it going on around them is shared by the members of the authorial audience, as we are also left in the dark regarding the nature of Scotty’s infirmity. This tension is furthered by the fact that the narrator withholds any clarifying information from us, especially the kind that might shed some light on how this experience is truly affecting Ann and her husband. We are
given only a few brief glimpses of these characters’ interiority, such as the following in which Ann contemplates their situation:

    The mother went to the window and looked out at the parking lot. Cars with their lights on were driving in and out. She stood at the window with her hands on the sill. She was talking to herself like this. We’re into something now, something hard.

    She was afraid. (255)

Here, we learn that Ann is aware of the seriousness of their dilemma, and is understandably terrified about what might be its end result. The way this interior monologue is introduced is particularly interesting: the heavy-handed, “She was talking to herself like this” makes an awkward rift in the narration, interrupting our attempts to read this sequence seamlessly. Moreover, the narrator’s choice of words—that Ann is “talking to herself” instead of “thinking” or “wondering”—emphasizes her disconnectedness from the other characters, even those who might be sharing similar fears.

    For the entirety of the narrative, the characters around Ann and her husband serve mostly as figures of contrast to them; only once in the story do they encounter anyone who could potentially understand what they are going through. When Ann is leaving the hospital for the first time to rest and bathe at home, she passes another family unfortunate enough to be in a situation similar to her own. In greater detail than is typically given in the story, the narrator describes what Ann sees before her:
…a man in a khaki shirt, a baseball cap pushed back on his head, a large woman wearing a housedress, slippers, a girl in jeans, hair in dozens of kinky braids, the table littered with flimsy wrappers and Styrofoam and coffee sticks and packets of salt and pepper. (256)

The “large woman” in the group mistakes Ann for hospital personnel and asks, “Is it about Nelson?” (256). Ann tells them she is just looking for the elevator, but—after the man points her in the right direction—she does not leave them right away. Instead, and without any kind of explanation from the narrator, she tells the man about her own situation:

“My son was hit by a car,” the mother said. “But he’s going to be all right. He’s in shock now, but it might be some kind of coma too. That’s what worries us, the coma part. I’m going out for a little while. Maybe I’ll take a bath. But my husband is with him. He’s watching. There’s a chance everything will change when I’m gone. My name is Ann Weiss.” (257)

This is the first time Ann fully articulates her predicament aloud, most likely because she feels that this particular listener will understand just what she means. This piece of dialogue is also the only place in the narrative when we are told Ann’s full name, and, just as in the scene with the doctor a few pages before, it is through the conversational disclosure of a character—not through the narrator—that we are given this information.

Unfortunately for Ann, although Nelson’s father does presumably understand what she is going through, he does not choose to say so; he merely “shakes his head” and says,
“Our Nelson” (257). Despite its potential to be otherwise, this scene turns out to be yet another unfortunate instance of a failed communication in the narrative.

The last scene of the story takes place once Ann has returned to the house, and—far from resolving the narrative’s tensions and instabilities—generates more questions than answers. Just as Ann sits down to rest, the phone rings, and an unidentified “man’s voice” on the other end says, “Mrs. Weiss” (257). After Ann asks if the man is calling about her son, the “voice” gets the last line of the story: “‘Scotty,’ the voice said. ‘It is about Scotty,’ the voice said. ‘It has to do with Scotty, yes’” (257). The narrative truncates on this ambiguous note, leaving Ann—and us—in a state of utter uncertainty: Was this call from the baker, or the hospital? Does Scotty live or die? What will happen to his parents as a result of either circumstance? Just as Ann and her husband have been unsuccessful in trying to understand and make others understand throughout the story, the narrative itself is unsuccessful at communicating something entirely “understandable” to its authorial audience.

This thematic statement—that attempts at meaningful communication and community in the face of a seemingly-meaningless world are ultimately futile—is not unusual to encounter as an artistic response to the anxieties of twentieth-century existence. In fact, this message sounds very similar to what some might understand as a typical “postmodern” epistemology: a shattering of objective meaning and understandability and reinforcement of the kind of fragmented open-endedness that often leads to existential despair. Of course, the aesthetic techniques of this narrative are not what we would identify as typically postmodern—certainly, reading “The Bath” is
nothing like reading the excessive, maximalist representation of this epistemological problem in texts like Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. How, then, does this narrative achieve a similarly disorienting and disconcerting sense of indeterminacy?

As Daniel Just posits in “Is Less More? A Reinvention of Realism in Raymond Carver’s Minimalist Short Story,” part of our discomfort in reading “The Bath” results from “its ability to unbalance the distance between the narrator and the narrated” (Just 314). Just explains:

> The act of narration in a story like “The Bath” thus becomes a product of a fundamental disjunction: Narration remains focused on the precision of language, whereas that which is narrated seems to evaporate. As “The Bath” reaches its end, the same detached tone prevails and even though the language retains a high level of exactitude for rendering realistic detail, the narrated story fails to objectify its details into a completed whole. (Just 314-315)

The frustration in reading “The Bath,” then, results in part from the authorial audience’s inability to come to a clear sense of what the story is telling us—of what it “means.” Just sees this effect of the story as one of the trademarks of minimalism, claiming that “the syntactic uniqueness of the minimalist story lies in the juxtaposition of incongruent effects of verisimilitude, on one hand, and a collapse of referentiality on the other” (Just 315). In other words, although we are reading a highly “realistic” story, the implied author does not permit us to understand a full signification of what actually “happens” within it.
Consider, for instance, this portion of “The Bath”:

She pulled into the driveway. The dog ran out from behind the house. He ran in circles on the grass. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wheel. She listened to the ticking of the engine.

She got out of the car and went to the door. She turned on lights and put on water for tea. She opened a can and fed the dog. She sat down on the sofa with her tea. (257)

This passage occurs just before Ann receives the phone call that ends the narrative. She has just returned from the hospital, and is physically alone for the first time in the story. Considering the terrifying experiences of the past few days, it seems fitting to assume that we would, at this point, be given some sense of her affective responses to those experiences. Instead, however, we are provided only with a step-by-step description, in the simplest of sentence structures, of Ann’s external activities; her psychological and emotional responses we can only guess about. This passage is only informative in terms of action, since it tells us nothing of import with regard to Ann’s growth and development as a character. As the narrative ends, we can see what is happening to Ann in a literal sense, but we suspect strongly that there is much we don’t know about what has happened to her within throughout the narrative.

However, not all scholars are as willing as Just to accept this indeterminacy as appropriate in the context of the literary movement. In the article “Echoes of Slammed Doors: Resonant Closure in Raymond Carver’s Minimalist Short Story,” Jack Bedell and Norman German discuss how many of Carver’s stories force the reader to “supply
the conclusion, not merely ferret out the theme” (Bedell and German 87). While this open-endedness can often make for a provocative and dynamic readerly experience, Bedell and German cite “The Bath” as an example of a time “when Carver’s resonant, detached closure fails” (Bedell and German 90). Calling the story a “faulty” one, the authors posit that the reader “is not given enough information to construct closure,” occasioning an “unsatisfactory” conclusion that “merely irritates the reader” (Bedell and German 91). For Bedell and German, the ending of “The Bath” is a case of “defective ambiguity” (Bedell and German 91)—since it does not resolve the tensions and instabilities developed in the narrative progression, the story, for these authors, “fails.”

While Bedell and German’s judgment of the story may be true to an initial feeling upon completion of the text, I would argue that we can attempt “constructing closure” for this narrative by making use the framework provided in Peter Rabinowitz’s Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation (1987).

Rabinowitz’s work discusses the ways in which certain narrative conventions help to shape our sense of coherence after reading a text. For a story like “The Bath,” Rabinowitz’s theories on titles and endings—two of the aspects he identifies as holding “privileged positions” in a narrative (Rabinowitz 58)—are particularly of note.

Titles, Rabinowitz argues, are among the pieces of a narrative that often dictate our sense of a text’s overall “meaning” (59). Positioned at the very onset of our reading experience, titles “not only guide our reading process by telling us where to concentrate,” but also “provide a core around which to organize an interpretation” (61). Furthermore, any repetition of a title in the work “pressures the authorial audience to tie
together the contexts in which the phrase appears and to interpret a number of apparently separate concerns...as in fact variations on a single theme” (62). With these insights in mind, how might we use the title of “The Bath” to help cohere the narrative’s ultimate message?

This narrative, about a couple who struggles to endure while their son is in critical condition, is not named after the traumatic incident or the child to whom it happened directly. Instead, it is named “The Bath,” which references seemingly minor events in the narrative that can only be connected to the child’s parents. While Scotty’s parents are inarguably at the center of the narrative, it is not clear why this particular title is most apt to convey the essence of their story. As we read “The Bath,” there are only two instances in which the title is repeated: once when the husband goes home to bathe and rest, and once when his wife plans to do the same. While taking a bath could certainly welcome all the usual suspects that accompany water imagery—rebirth, baptism, a return to the safety of life inside the womb, etc.—it is hard to see the baths in this story as serving any positive symbolic purpose. Perhaps we are to connect these instances of bathing to the theme of childhood: the comfort and safety of the father and mother’s baths are cut short prematurely, just like Scotty’s happy, normal youth. What might also be likely, I would argue, is that the title’s naming of an arbitrary object rather than a more obviously meaningful individual or occurrence is just another way in which this narrative denies its authorial audience access to conventional referentiality and understanding. In any case, we are left to interpret the title’s significance for ourselves,
as the narrative does not supply enough information to make any one interpretation definitive.

In addition to the importance assigned to titles, Rabinowitz discusses how the prescribed effects of endings contribute to our attempt at “packing up” a text once we finish reading it (158). According to what he calls the “rule of conclusive endings,” there is a “widely applicable interpretive convention that permits us to read it in a special way, as a conclusion, as a summing up of the work’s meaning” (160). Upon finishing a narrative, Rabinowitz explains, “readers assume that authors put their best thoughts last, and thus assign a special value to the final pages of a text” (160). This can be accomplished tidily when a narrative’s ending is “congruent” with what comes before it—but of course, as Rabinowitz points out, endings are not always so uncomplicated (161). Rather than providing the audience with a final sentiment that clearly ties up the narrative’s tensions and instabilities, “many realistic writers prefer endings in which the full consequences of the events portrayed—even the consequences immediately pertinent to the narrative at hand—are neither worked out nor cleverly implied” (164-165).

“The Bath” is, without a doubt, an example of just the kind of text in which the authorial audience is left unsure of both the “events portrayed” and of their “full consequences.” However, it is important to note—as Rabinowitz does—that “lack of closure” does not mean “lack of conclusion”: in order to follow the rule of conclusive endings, “the authorial audience will take these open endings and assume that openness itself is part of the point of the conclusion” (Rabinowitz 165). In refusing to provide the
information necessary to resolve the issues developed before it, the ending of “The Bath” leaves us to choose between two bleak interpretive options: we can assume that the call is from the hospital, and that the news is probably not good, or we can assume that the call is yet another from the baker, merely reasserting his role as a “Grim Reaper” symbolic of death’s inevitable coming to “call.” Certainly, neither of these options is a “happy” ending; both leave us with the sense of hopelessness and lack of understanding that has hitherto been established in the story. Ultimately, we can only take this bleak ambiguity as a conclusion in itself, and while this sentiment may be disappointing or “unsatisfactory” in a conventional sense of what we expect from narrative endings, it is nevertheless what is communicated by this text.

Twenty pages longer than “The Bath,” the version of this story that appears in Carver’s original manuscript, entitled “A Small, Good Thing,” is composed of four long sections and is virtually impossible to read as a slight variation of the “same story.” The differences between the texts may not be striking in the first several pages, but before long, “A Small, Good Thing” becomes a different narrative altogether from its Lish counterpart. Even within the part of the narrative that follows the same essential plot as “The Bath,” there are discursive differences at work that affect the overall story and its impact in several important ways.

A look at the opening passage, for example, displays relatively minor alterations:
Saturday afternoon she drove to the little bakery in the shopping center. After looking through a loose-leaf binder with photographs of cakes taped onto the pages, she ordered chocolate, his favorite. The cake she chose was decorated with a spaceship and launching pad under a sprinkling of white stars at one end of the cake, and a planet made of red frosting at the other end. His name, SCOTTY, would be in raised green letters beneath the planet. (Carver 804)

At first glance, what the comparative reader might notice is that Carver’s original opening is slightly longer than in the version first published, as he gives his readers a few more words of description about the cake’s appearance. Certainly, this is not the kind of edit that makes or breaks the meaning of the paragraph. But another change, the initial use of the pronouns “she” and “his” in place of the Lish version’s “the mother” and “the child’s,” establishes a dynamic the Lish version does not: the readerly impulse to identify antecedents. By referring to two of the story’s main characters first with pronouns, Carver’s original compels the reader to uncover the identities of the characters in question—to “get to know” them better—which, as we shall see, is a compulsion this narrative allows its audience to pursue. In the Lish version, on the other hand, the characters are referred to with vague nouns from the onset, establishing a lack of specificity that makes it easier to keep the characters—and, consequently, their situation—at an impersonal distance.

Another difference apparent within the first few pages is the original’s inclusion of more scenic descriptions. While in the Lish version we are usually left to our own devices to conjure a detailed picture of the narrated events, the Carver version—while
by no means providing exhaustive vivid descriptions—often allows readers to picture what the characters see around them. In the opening scene at the bakery, for example, the narrator relays what Ann sees just before she exits:

She looked into the back of the bakery and could see a long, heavy wooden table with aluminum pie pans stacked at one end, and beside the table a metal container filled with empty racks. There was an enormous oven. A radio was playing country-western music. (805)

While this is not the sort of additional information that drastically alters the progression of the story’s plot, it does suggest that Carver intended in his original version to create a slightly more mimetic experience for his narrative audience.

Unlike these relatively minor differences, some of what is present in Carver’s original version—even up to the point at which the Lish version truncates—has a serious impact on the thematic suggestions of the narrative as a whole. As mentioned above, Carver’s opening seems to urge its readers to anticipate the names of the characters it mentions. Whereas Ann is the only character whose name we are told in “The Bath,” “A Small, Good Thing” divulges the names of its characters with frequency. We are told—by the narrator—that “the husband’s” name is “Howard” as soon he makes his first appearance in the story, and we are also given the names of various doctors as they emerge as characters (Dr. Francis, Dr. Parsons, etc.). This difference is indicative of a larger trend in the narrative: the characters’ efforts at knowing and understanding other characters. Although we see traces of this in the Lish version, the original is rife with passages that help to foreground this theme.
We encounter the desire for community at the very onset of Carver’s narrative when the narrator divulges Ann’s thoughts as she orders Scotty’s cake. Although the baker makes Ann feel “uncomfortable,” she tries to imagine what they might have in common:

… [she] wondered if he’d ever done anything else with his life besides be a baker. She was a mother and thirty-three years old, and it seemed to her that everyone, especially someone the baker’s age—a man old enough to be her father—must have children who’d gone through this special time of cakes and birthday parties. There must be that between them, she thought. (804)

Of course, this is the same baker—at least at this point in the narrative—who is “not jolly” and permits “just the minimum exchange of words, the necessary information” to escape him (804). He is “abrupt with her, not rude, just abrupt,” and Ann gives up on “trying to make friends with him” (804). While this scene initiates the same instability with the baker that is present in the Lish version, it also establishes the search for community and understanding that will remain an important thematic element in the rest of the narrative.

In the spirit of this attempt at closeness with other characters, this version features moments of tenderness between Ann and Howard—occurring as early as the first moments we see them together at the hospital—that are absent from Lish’s narrative. Before Howard leaves to go home to take his bath, he kisses Ann on the forehead and the couple “touches hands” (806). Although they are in a desperate situation, it is nevertheless implied that Ann and Howard are united in confronting it.
Similarly, in the narration of both characters’ psychological activity, there is not as much emphasis on going it “alone”; their thoughts are given to us by the narrator without the phrasing that they are “talking to themselves like this” [my emphasis], as in the Lish version (253, 255).

Ann and Howard aren’t the only characters who divulge more information in Carver’s original text, as the longer narrative permits a great deal more to be known—by the characters and the readers—about Scotty’s condition. The doctors in Carver’s original story are not as vague when responding to the couple’s questions, and at one point, they even provide a relatively succinct diagnosis of his infirmity (a “hairline fracture of the skull” and a “concussion”). While it ultimately becomes the case that no one really understands the extent of Scotty’s trauma, there is greater emphasis in Carver’s original on trying to understand it—and often, this manifests itself syntactically. When in dialogue with the hospital staff about Scotty, Ann and Howard ask repeatedly if he is in a “coma” (the word appears eight times within four paragraphs on page 809 alone), as if the word itself signifies something understandable. This wanting desperately to “understand” is factored more prominently into the language of this version, as well; on multiple occasions, Ann and Howard respond to news of Scotty’s health and the hospital’s attempts at diagnosing it with the utterance, “I don’t understand” (807, 812). Instances like these, which recur frequently, provide an appropriate build-up for what will eventually be the narrative’s ultimate statement on this theme.
Comparing a scene between Ann and Howard at the hospital shows clear differences in terms of these themes of community and understanding in the texts. After Scotty is brought back upstairs from getting a “scan,” Carver’s narrator relates:

Howard sat in the chair beside her. They looked at each other. He wanted to say something else and reassure her, but he was afraid to. He took her hand and put it in his lap, and this made him feel better, her hand being there. He picked up her hand and squeezed it, then just held it. They sat like that for a while, watching the boy and not talking. From time to time he squeezed her hand. Finally, she took her hand away and rubbed her temples.

“I’ve been praying,” she said. (810)

Up to this point, the passage is virtually identical to the one in the Lish version. However, here we are given an additional paragraph after Howard tells Ann that he, too, has been praying:

“That’s good,” she said. Almost for the first time, she felt they were together in it, this trouble. Then she realized it had only been happening to her and to Scotty. She hadn’t let Howard into it, though he was there and needed all along. She could see he was tired. The way his head looked heavy and angled into his chest. She felt a good tenderness toward him. She felt glad to be his wife. (811)

In this passage, we are made aware of two things: first, that Ann has been feeling isolated in her struggle with what has happened to Scotty, and second, that she is no longer feeling this way. Unlike “The Bath,” in which the authorial audience is left to speculate for itself what Scotty’s accident has done to affect the couple’s relationship,
here we are privy to a look at a character’s psychological activity for some clarifying insight. And as with several other instances of this kind, what is happening “on the inside” is not nearly as depressing as we might have assumed from a vantage point outside the characters’ minds.

One additional difference of note occurs in the scene just before Ann finally leaves the hospital to go home and rest. When Ann encounters Nelson’s family on the way out of the hospital, Carver’s original version specifies that they are “a Negro family,” referring to the characters subsequently as “the Negro man,” “the Negro woman,” and so on. Especially for a twenty-first century reader, this is an uncomfortable departure from the Lish version, as are several places earlier in the narrative when Carver provides unnecessary ethnic descriptions of the hospital staff (such as the “Scandinavian nurse” on page 808 and the “dark-complexioned men” speaking in “a foreign tongue” on page 811). It seems that, in these passages, Carver may be trying to use ethnic difference as a way to reinforce the idea of a barrier between Scotty’s parents and the rest of the characters.

Of course, Carver’s assumption that racial or cultural difference automatically creates a barrier to relating with others is incredibly problematic—but this aspect of the scene is not all that differs from the Lish version. After Ann tells the “Negro man” her name and situation, instead of the minimal response he gives in the shorter narrative, he reciprocates her gesture:

He looked down at the table, and then he looked back at Ann. She was still standing there. He said, “Our Nelson, he’s on the operating table. Somebody cut
him. Tried to kill him. There was a fight where he was at. At this party. They say he was just standing and watching. Not bothering nobody. But that don’t mean nothing these days. Now he’s on the operating table. We’re just hoping and praying, that’s all we can do now.” (816)

After the man shares this information, the narrator provides us with Ann’s internal reaction:

She wanted to talk more with these people who were in the same kind of waiting she was in. She was afraid, and they were afraid. They had that in common. She would have liked to have said something else about the accident, told them more about Scotty, that it had happened on the day of his birthday, Monday, that he was still unconscious. Yet she didn’t know how to begin and so only stood there looking at them without saying anything more. (816)

These additions are interesting for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the man’s response to Ann allows us to perceive him as a character to compare—not contrast—to her. As Ann suspected upon first seeing him, the man does understand what she is going through with her own family—they have that “in common” (816). But Ann’s not “saying anything more” is also very interesting, as it further complicates what has been established as a painful difficulty for Scotty’s parents—especially his mother—to communicate with other characters in the narrative. Even in the face of someone who is suitable to talk to, Ann remains unable to find words with which to carry on a conversation. Thus, the dynamic is significantly different here than in Lish’s account:
the problem is not merely finding a listener, but is, instead, finding the words themselves.

Just after this scene, a line break occurs for the first time in this version of the narrative. Ann returns home to receive the same menacing phone call that ended the Lish version, and, while essentially the “same” call, this one features an even more biting last remark: “‘Scotty,’ the man’s voice said. ‘It’s about Scotty, yes. It has to do with Scotty, that problem. Have you forgotten about Scotty?’ the man said. Then he hung up” (817). However, because Ann calls Howard at the hospital immediately afterward, the confusion as to the identity of the caller is—unlike in the Lish version—almost immediately cleared up. Howard ensures Ann that Scotty’s condition has neither worsened nor improved, solidifying our knowledge that the phone call must have been, once again, from the baker.

Here, Carver’s original narrative takes a complete departure from the Lish version, since it progresses forward from this point. After getting off of the phone with Howard, Ann takes a bath—a plot detail that, it can be noted, does not here bear the kind of thematic weight it might in a story by that name—and heads back to the hospital. During her drive, however, Ann thinks back to two years before, initiating a flashback that will last for several pages and add an important psychological dimension to her character.

Ann recalls her terror on a rainy afternoon when Scotty was lost and “they’d been afraid he’d drowned” in a drainage ditch near their home. Howard had gone to look for Scotty, and Ann had pleaded for help in the form of divine intervention:
She dropped to her knees. She stared into the current and said that if He would let them have Scotty back, if he could have somehow miraculously—she said it out loud, “miraculously”—escaped the water and the culvert, she knew he hadn’t, but if he had, if He could only let them have Scotty back, somehow not let him be wedged in the culvert, she promised then that she and Howard would change their lives, change everything, go back to the small town where they had come from, away from this suburban place that could ruthlessly snatch away your only child. (819)

In reality, Scotty had merely been “hiding,” and Howard brought him back unscathed only a few moments later. Since that day, the family had “continued to live as they had been living,” a choice that Ann now begins to regret:

Nothing more was ever said about that afternoon, and in time she had stopped thinking about it. Now here they were still in the same city and it was two years later, and Scotty was again in peril, an awful peril, and she began to see this circumstance, this incident and the not waking up as punishment. (820)

From this flashback, we learn that—for the entirety of the narrative—Ann has been carrying an even heavier mental and emotional burden than we suspected. In addition to feelings of disconnectedness, sadness, and uncertainty, Ann has been feeling guilt, which adds a horrifying dimension to her parental predicament. As she walks back into the hospital, Ann thinks again of the African-American family, and, envisioning the teenage girl among them, imagines cautioning her not to “have children” (821).
Considering the complex entanglement of feelings Ann is currently suffering as a result of parenthood, her caution here seems entirely reasonable.

What follows this telling psychological information is the most emotionally taxing portion of the narrative. Almost as soon as Ann reaches Scotty’s room, the boy stirs and opens his eyes, but, after a brief hopeful moment, the narrator relates the disturbing scene that follows:

The boy looked up at them again, though without any sign of recognition or comprehension. Then his eyes scrunched closed, his mouth opened, 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. (823)

With this vision of his “last breath,” Scotty leaves his parents—and the narrative—for good. At this point, the story has reached a bleakness far surpassing that of version previously discussed: the tensions and instabilities that remained at the end of the Lish narrative have been resolved, but with the painful objective knowledge that Scotty is dead, and that, so far, all attempts to understand and communicate this excruciating situation to others have been futile. If this were where Carver chose to end his narrative, there would be no question over which version was ultimately the more depressing one to read—but alas, the narrative goes on.

With incredibly “minimal” narration—virtually no scenic details or psychological insights—we follow the couple as they return home, where Howard begins to crumble. The couple sits together on the sofa, and Ann comforts her husband:
He began to weep. She pulled his head over into her lap and patted his shoulder. “He’s gone,” she said. She kept patting his shoulder. Over his sobs she could hear the coffeemaker hissing, out in the kitchen. “There, there,” she said tenderly. “Howard, he’s gone. He’s gone and now we’ll have to get used to that. To being alone.” (825)

While it is probable that Ann means being alone together, the next few paragraphs show the couple drifting—at least physically—apart. Howard moves “aimlessly around the room,” then proceeds to go out to the garage and sit clutching Scotty’s bicycle. Ann stays in the house, making the necessary “calls to relatives” (825). But just as she finishes one call and prepares to make another, the phone rings, bearing a final bullying comment: “‘Your Scotty, I got him ready for you,’ the man’s voice said. ‘Did you forget him?’” (825). Understandably, this call pushes Ann over the edge. Unable to keep up the façade of strength any longer, she finally releases the anger that has been welling up inside of her:

“You evil bastard!” she shouted into the receiver. “How can you do this, you evil son of a bitch!”

“Scotty,” the man said. “Have you forgotten about Scotty?” Then the man hung up on her. (825)

This time, Ann will not settle for letting the caller off of the hook. Having noticed that there were sounds of “radio music” in the background, Ann realizes that the calls must be coming from the “son-of-a-bitching baker,” and insists that she and Howard drive to the shopping center immediately to confront him (826). When they
arrive at the bakery, the couple knocks on a door at the back, and finally faces its aggressor: “a big man in an apron” who tells them he is “closed for business” (826-27). Unwilling to take “no” for an answer, the couple forces its way inside, and the scene becomes incredibly tense as the parents move ever closer toward the man who has done nothing but elevate their torment. Ann is particularly determined to speak her mind, feeling “an anger that made her feel larger than herself, larger than either of these men” (827). Despite the baker’s assertions that he wants “no trouble,” Ann’s emotions have reached the boiling point:

“My boy’s dead,” she said with a cold, even finality. “He was hit by a car Monday afternoon. We’ve been waiting with him until he died. But, of course, you couldn’t be expected to know that, could you? Bakers can’t know everything. Can they, Mr. Baker? But he’s dead. Dead, you bastard.” Just as suddenly as it had welled in her the anger dwindled, gave way to something else, a dizzy feeling of nausea. She leaned against the wooden table that was sprinkled with flour, put her hands over her face and began to cry, her shoulders rocking back and forth. “It isn’t fair,” she said. “It isn’t, isn’t fair.” (828)

It is here, just when the characters have reached the peak of their desperation, that the story begins to take an unexpected turn. Rather than turning them out, the baker puts down his rolling pin, undoes his apron, and tells them, “Please sit down, you people” (829). After apologizing for their loss, he asks their forgiveness, assuring them that he is not an “evil man” (829). He gives the couple some coffee, and urges them to have some freshly-baked cinnamon rolls. In the passage from which Carver takes the story’s title,
the baker insists, “You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a
time like this” (829).

In the story’s final paragraphs, the couple does break bread with the baker, and
listen as he tries to make them understand: he tells them of loneliness and childlessness,
and about repeating the days “with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty” (830).
In the final passage, we are left with an image of real, long-sought-after communion
that is a far cry from the vision at the close of the Lish version:

They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread.

It was daylight under the florescent trays of light. They talked on into the early
morning, the high pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of
leaving. (830)

It is in this most unlikely of places—with the most unlikely of individuals—that the
couple finally achieves the communication they’ve so badly been lacking. As they find,
achieving this is not as simple as telling one’s own story, but involves listening to and
caring about the stories of others, sharing life’s joys and sorrows in a real, reciprocal
way, and finding in that sharing the strength and the words to “keep going.”

It is easy to see why, upon comparing the Lish and Carver versions of this
narrative, reviewers like Stephen King called “The Bath” the “less palatable” of the two
(King 11). In “A Small, Good Thing,” the baker’s character is permitted to move
beyond simply a “sinister figure, symbolic of death’s inevitability” (King 11); rather
than using him as “a construct designed for some thematic purpose” (Phelan, Reading
People 122), Carver’s baker is fleshed out as a human being who also suffers from the pains of disconnectedness and who is also a candidate for redemption from it.

In King’s final assessment, the original version “has a satisfying symmetry that the stripped-down Lish version lacks, but it has something more important: it has heart” (King 11). Daniel Just ultimately gives a similar appraisal to the story, declaring that the original reaches a “much fuller form of expression” (Just 314). For Bedell and German, “The triumph of this [original ending] rests in the connection between these characters through the stories of their lives, spoken and unspoken” (92). While there are still “echoes” that resonate at the close of the original narrative, Bedell and German argue, they are not those of resounding despair, but of “the Last Supper, rebirth in the rising of the bread, and the possibilities of genuine contact between individuals” (Bedell and German 92).

These—and many other Carver scholars—are unequivocally in favor of the original manuscript version over the version first published. With the exceptions of the potentially racist tendencies as well as a few instances of the kind of over-sentimentality and “melodrama” attacked by the likes of Giles Harvey, I think it would be difficult to argue against the greater “palatability” of Carver’s text in comparison to Lish’s. However, as stated earlier, I take issue with the assessment that one version “fails” while the other “succeeds”—or, to return to Irving Howe’s conclusion, that one text is the “better” of the two—as these value judgments assume an attempt to adhere to a single set of criteria.
Quoting the opening of the narrative(s) under discussion, Carver scholar Enrico Monti posits that, “In Lish’s editing, all that was not strictly necessary was to be left out, and in a few cases, one has the impression that some of what may have been necessary followed as well” (Monti 61). I would argue a slightly different claim: that what is deemed “necessary information” to include in a narrative depends upon the vision an implied author is attempting to convey through the text. In the case of “The Bath” and “A Small, Good Thing,” it is particularly evident that what is considered “necessary” by the author of the first narrative is drastically different for the author of the second, especially in terms of the emotional and ethical challenge it poses for the reader.

While “The Bath” prioritizes the emphasis of a bleak aesthetic vision, it also allows for the reader to avoid emotional involvement with the narrative by leaving off with no clear indication that Scotty passes away. The manuscript version, on the other hand, demands of the reader the recognition of a tragic and painful loss—but it also demands a working through of that loss by way of the recognition that human experience is not limited to isolation or despair. This loss and subsequent coming-to-terms provides a more complex—and I would argue, ultimately more rewarding—emotional and ethical engagement than is available to the reader of the shorter version, a difference that transforms the effect of the narrative as a whole.
CHAPTER TWO
CHARACTERIZING FEMALE EXPERIENCE: THE WOMEN OF WWTA

By the end of “A Small, Good Thing” as Carver originally wrote it, Ann Weiss totally overtakes her husband, Howard, as the protagonist of the narrative. Her attempts to connect with other characters, as well as the addition of her very telling flashback to an incident several years before, give her a psychological depth we never come close to getting with her husband. Furthermore, the couple only reaches its eventual moments of epiphany and redemption with the baker because Ann had insisted they go to confront him—and when the narrative ends, the communion scene is all the more poignant because of what we know to be Ann’s personal struggle with feeling somehow responsible for Scotty’s accident. In short, while the Lish version uses both of Scotty’s parents like pieces on a chessboard—constructs to further his bleak aesthetic vision—the Carver version portrays Ann as an actual person, a complicated woman capable of depth and growth and change.

Carver’s treatment of women within and outside of his texts has been a topic of extensive conversation. In fact, one of the unintentionally very prevalent motifs that recurs throughout Sklenicka’s biography is Carver’s own deplorable treatment of Maryann Carver, his wife of 25 years. Throughout the time the two were married, Maryann gave up countless opportunities for the sake of her husband’s career, supporting their entire family on a cocktail waitress or door-to-door saleswoman’s salary for long periods of time when Carver’s drinking was at its worst. The domestic
turmoil brought on by Carver’s alcoholism and numerous extramarital affairs was often accompanied by physical violence toward Maryann, a biographical detail that has compromised Carver’s reputation in the minds of even his biggest fans.

Within Carver’s narratives, female characters don’t always fare so well, either—but of course, neither do his male ones. Rather than seeing what happens to the women in Carver’s texts as an overall trend of misogyny, I view these occurrences as part of what Marilynne Robinson explains as the larger complaint that Carver is “patronizing toward his fictional creations”—that they “sometimes seem set up, or condescended to” (Robinson qtd. in Malamet 59). In this chapter, I’d like to argue that a comparison of the published and manuscript versions of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* challenges the accuracy of this complaint as it pertains to Carver’s female characters, at least in this specific collection. While the characterization of women in the published *WWTA* seems to border on misogyny, the women of the manuscript version are portrayed with a sincerity and depth that alters our perceptions of the implied authors behind the narratives these characters inhabit.

If my approach to the characters in these texts seems oddly “personal,” it is because I am regarding them as possible persons rather than merely linguistic constructs. My thinking here is in line with James Phelan’s *Reading People, Reading Plots* (1989), in which he challenges the idea that characters in fiction are just “convenient abstractions from verbal signs” (Phelan 109). Being a linguistic construct is an undeniable *part* of being a character—the part Phelan terms the “synthetic” component—but characters have other aspects, as well. The dimensions and functions
of characters that make them seem “real” to us are part of what Phelan terms the “mimetic” component (110). Furthermore, there is a “thematic” component of character at work when we take a character to be a “representative figure”—an individual standing for a larger group—and connect that “representativeness” to a larger “proposition or assertion” made by the implied author of the text (110). Thus, in Phelan’s view, characters are “multichromatic,” and “the mimetic and thematic components may be more or less developed, whereas the synthetic component, though always present, may be more or less foregrounded” (111). In other words, while all three components are always present, they are emphasized to different degrees—for different purposes—in different works.

What is the “point” of viewing the element of character as more complex than just words on a page? As with most of the theories accompanying the rhetorical approach to narrative, this view of character has a great deal to do with overall effects. In the “structuralist view of character” offered by Jonathan Culler, we are required to think of characters as “sets of predicates grouped under proper names” (Phelan 112), giving precedence to the synthetic component of a work in a way that allows for emotional and ethical distance from it. Phelan explains:

Where the structuralist remains suspicious of the emotional involvement that comes from viewing the character as a possible person, the mimetic analyst regards that involvement as crucial to the effect of the work. In short, where the structuralist seeks an objective view of the text, one which foregrounds the text
as construct, the mimetic analyst takes a rhetorical view, one which foregrounds
the text as communication between author and reader. (116)

This approach, one that gives weight to the mimetic component of fictional creations
and allows for them to be thought of as “possible people,” is the one I’ll be taking to
consider the female characters in two stories from WWTA. I will begin with a brief look
at the short narrative “Gazebo,” and will then spend the majority of my analysis on “So
Much Water So Close to Home,” a text that, like “A Small, Good Thing,” Lish’s edits
reduced to over half of its original length.

In “Gazebo,” a male character-narrator named Duane tells us of his tumultuous
romance with his wife, Holly. The couple works as managers of a motel, and, as the
story opens, we learn that Duane has recently cheated on Holly with a “little Mexican
maid” named Juanita (Carver 235). In both versions of the story, Duane’s conduct
toward Holly and Juanita leaves a great deal to be desired. In addition to his marital
infidelity, Duane constantly objectifies both women through language: he repeatedly
describes as Juanita a “little thing” and Holly as an “attractive woman,” sometimes
going into great deal about each woman’s physical appearance (772-773). While neither
version of this narrative provides Holly or Juanita with any substantial opportunity for
transformative change or growth, the manuscript version does add dimensions to their
characters that allow us to regard them as people with psychological and emotional
depth. While Holly is a greater presence in both narratives, I’d like to focus here on the
character of Juanita to show that these differences in characterization are at work even
for the women who seem to be more peripheral in the texts.
Juanita appears only a few times in the Lish version, first when Duane describes their first sexual encounter, and again when he tells about their affair in slightly greater detail. Duane explains, “The thing with Juanita was five days a week between the hours of ten and eleven. It was in whatever unit she was in when she was making her cleaning rounds. I’d just walk in where she was working and shut the door behind me” (237). As far as the quality of the time they spent together is concerned, all the Duane of this version has to say is that they were “sweet with each other, but swift. It was fine” (237). Since the story is told through Duane’s focalization, this is, of course, his perception of these events, leaving the reader to wonder what Juanita thought and felt about the affair.

In the manuscript version of this story, however, this passage continues with an explanation of the day Duane and Juanita were caught by another maid:

Then one fine morning, Bobbi, the other maid, she walks in on us. These women worked together, but they were not friends. Like that she went to the office and told Holly. Why she’d do such a thing I couldn’t understand then and still can’t. Juanita was scared and ashamed. She dressed and drove home. I saw Bobbi outside a while later and sent her home too. (776)

Certainly, this passage gives us even more reason to find fault with Duane: his presumptions about the extent of the relationship between these women, his ludicrous inability to understand Bobbi’s motivations for telling Holly about the affair, and his treatment of Juanita and Bobbi as easily dismissed subordinates only reinforce our view of him as an ignorant misogynist. But embedded in this passage is also one of the only details of about Juanita that is not centered on her role as a sexual object: we are told—
in passing, to be sure—about her emotional and ethical reaction to being caught, a memory that the Duane of the Lish version fails to provide. While this may seem to be an incredibly minor change, it is one that makes a substantial difference to the reader attempting to perceive Juanita as a believable person with whom we can empathize.

Of course, as discussed in the Introduction, it is important to distinguish between the views of the narrator and the views of the implied author. We cannot assume that the implied author of either narrative shares Duane’s misogyny, but, since the implied author is responsible for putting the various pieces of the narrative together in this way, we can determine that glimpses of Juanita’s humanity were thought necessary to include by one implied author but not by the other. Thus, while the Lish version uses Juanita as a stock character, only useful insofar as she helps initiate the text’s major instability, the Carver version asks us to pause and realize that she is also a character for whom the narrative’s events are emotionally and ethically strenuous.

These kinds of differences in the representation and treatment of female characters are by no means limited to the narratives told by male character-narrators or through male focalization. “So Much Water So Close to Home” features a female character-narrator named Claire, a wife and mother under mental and emotional duress due to a crisis involving her husband, Stuart. While they share the same basic plot for most of the story, the two versions of this narrative present vastly different psychological portraits of Claire as well as significantly different dynamics in the gendered power-struggle that occurs between her and her husband. Just as in “Gazebo,”
these differences in character development have a significant impact on our judgment of Claire as a fleshed-out character on the whole.

Both versions of “So Much Water So Close to Home” begin in medias res with a tense scene between Claire and Stuart at dinner: she is angry at him for his association to a mysterious situation involving a diseased woman (we are told only that “she was dead”), and Stuart is adamant that he has done nothing “wrong” (Carver 273). At the end of this first scene, Stuart storms off angrily, and a frustrated Claire rakes her arm “across the drainboard,” sending dishes crashing “to the floor” (273). Claire “knows he’s heard” from the other room, but he does not return to confront her. In the Lish version, the scene ends here; but Carver’s original differs from this in several interesting ways.

Before Claire knocks the dishes to the floor in the manuscript version, she tells us what she is thinking to herself at this time: “I must not dwell on this any longer. I must get over it; put it out of sight, out of mind, etc., and ‘go on’” (Carver 865). Immediately thereafter, Claire relates that, “Despite everything, knowing all that may be in store, I rake my arm across the drainboard and send the dishes and glasses smashing and scattering across the floor” (865). Rather than portraying this action as one done without aforethought, as in the Lish version, this Claire makes clear to her narrative audience that she first feels a moment of hesitation and restraint. Furthermore, when Stuart hears the dishes and does not react, Claire thinks, “I hate him for that, for not moving…I pity him for listening, detached, and then settling back and drawing on his cigarette…He can never know how much I pity him for that, for sitting still and
listening, and letting the smoke stream out of his mouth” (865). This feeling of pity toward Stuart is one absent from the Lish version of the story, and recurs in several interesting places. Since these insights regarding Claire’s character occur early on in this narrative, we have a notably different perception of her and her struggle as the narrative progresses forward.

Just after this opening scene, we discover the cause of the initial instability between Claire and Stuart: on their fishing trip, the men found a dead girl’s body in the water, but stayed to fish for two days before leaving and calling anyone for help. When Stuart returned from the trip, he slept with Claire as if nothing was wrong, telling her about their disturbing find only after receiving several angry phone calls about the incident the next day. Though this is inarguably something about which Claire should be angry, she quickly moves beyond outrage to display a set of more psychologically complicated reactions.

One of these reactions is Claire’s identification with the dead girl, which she makes clear when narrating the event that takes place just after the one with which the story opened. In hopes of resolving their disagreement, the couple takes a drive to a nearby park, but this only succeeds in making matters worse: as they sit on the banks of a creek, Claire looks into the water and sees herself “right in it,” visualizing herself as the dead girl (276). In the Lish version, the scene ends here—but in the Carver version, Claire goes on to muse, “Nothing will be any different. We will go on and on and on. We will go on even now, as if nothing had happened” (870). Then, as if triggered by this thought of stasis, Claire slaps him: “I raise my hand, wait a fraction of
a second, and then slap his cheek hard. This is crazy, I think as I slap him. We need to lock our fingers together. We need to help one another. This is crazy” (870). What is “crazy” to Claire is the thought of challenging Stuart, of displacing the gendered power-dynamic that seems to be a permanent fixture in their relationship. She is about to hit him again when Stuart “catches my wrist before I can strike again and raises his own hand. I crouch, waiting, and see something come into his eyes and then dart away. He drops his hand. I drift even faster around and around in the pond” (870).

This scene is one of many places in the story where Stuart threatens Claire with violence, a theme factored more prominently into this narrative than in the Lish version. Although he does not strike her back, Stuart’s violence toward Claire occurs verbally in the car on the way back home when he attempts to use their son, Dean, as leverage against her. “You’re not being fair,” he tells her, “To either one of us. Or to Dean, I might add. Think about Dean for a minute. Think about me. Think about someone else besides yourself for a change” (870). Stuart’s accusations are meant to remind Claire that, as the woman in their relationship, she is expected to passively withstand whatever mayhem may befall their family to sustain the larger “good.” But instead of letting his guilt trip have this effect, Claire thinks, “There is nothing I can say to him now” (870), and adds, “He knows. I could laugh in his face. I could weep” (871). We can read this comment, too, as a feeling of pity for Stuart, further developing what we can identify as Claire’s budding feelings of superiority over him.

Throughout both versions of the text, Stuart repeatedly warns Claire not to “rile him up” (270), insinuating that he has the potential to wield his supposed power in a
physically abusive manner and has perhaps already done so in the past. The cigarettes Stuart smokes constantly add phallic imagery to his depiction, symbolizing what he clearly considers to be feelings of superiority and control associated with his masculinity. As she struggles to overthrow this power dynamic, Claire starts to avoid her husband, sleeping on the couch instead of in their bed with him. Her feelings of distance from Stuart involve an increasing sense of physical revulsion, a detail made more prominent in the Carver version by Claire’s constant references to Stuart’s “heavy arms” (867) and “broad fingers, covered with hair” (868). For the Claire of this version, Stuart’s hands have become repulsive, tainted with the disservice he has done to a dead woman who could no longer help herself, and these hands remain the same, in Claire’s mind, regardless of the female body they may be handling at the given time.

While these differences in Claire’s narration certainly alter our interpretations of her as a character, there is an even more insightful passage in the Carver version that is absent from the other. In this lengthy paragraph, Claire thinks back on her past: “The past is unclear,” she starts, and goes on to describe “a girl” who grew up in a small town, moved “as if in a dream” through school, and then met an engineer who “asks her for a date. Eventually, seeing that it’s his aim, she lets him seduce her” (Carver 872). She remembers that this engineer, whom she married a short while later, told her during a fight that “someday this affair (his words: ‘this affair’) will end in violence. She remembers this. She files this away somewhere and begins repeating it aloud from time to time” (872). This insight makes clear that Stuart’s threats of violence are not a recent
phenomenon: rather, they have been following Claire around for years, profoundly affecting her perceptions of her husband as well as her ability to challenge him.

Another important piece of disclosure in this paragraph is that Claire once went to stay in a facility for her mental health, and that during that time, Stuart’s mother came to live with Stuart and Dean. Claire remembers that “she, Claire, Claire spoils everything and returns home in a few weeks,” and that, soon after, “His mother moves out of the house and takes an apartment across town and perches there, as if waiting” (873). In this flashback, Claire also recalls telling Stuart about “some women patients” she heard “discussing fellatio” at the facility, since “She thinks this is something he might like to hear. She smiles in the dark. Stuart is pleased at hearing this. He strokes her arm. Things are going to be okay, he says. From now on everything is going to be different and better for them” (873). This paragraph tells us a great deal about Claire’s personal history, the nature and history of her relationship with Stuart, and the significant role Stuart’s mother has played in their lives. These clues create a tension for the authorial audience, signaling to the reader that Claire’s psychological anxieties are serious and longstanding, and are perhaps threatening to resurface due to the current state of affairs.

In the Carver version of this text, Claire’s growing awareness of the unequal balance of power in her marriage far surpasses this development in the revised narrative. In another scene removed in entirety from the Lish version, Claire tells us about what happens on the evening after the couple’s trip to the park. At dinner, Dean asks Stuart about the dead body, which he heard about from the other children at school.
When Stuart gives him a shorthand version of “what happened,” Dean asks, “What kind of a body? Was it a girl?” (873). Clearly, it matters a great deal to all of them what type of a body it was: identifying the body as female enables the men to keep their distance, but forces Claire to confront her own feelings of violation and victimization. Consequently, when Stuart touches Claire shortly thereafter, “His fingers burn” (874)—she moves away from him, despite his insistence that he “should be able to touch [her] without [her] jumping out of [her] skin” (874). Claire continues to pull away, provoking a warning from Stuart that is reminiscent of the one recalled in her flashback sequence: “Be that way if you want. But just remember” (874). Later that evening, when Claire insists on sleeping on the couch for the second night in a row, Stuart reasserts this warning, saying, “I’m thinking you’re making a big mistake by doing this. I’m thinking you’d better think again about what you’re doing” (874). With these threats, Stuart intends to remind Claire of the gendered power-dynamic he feels to be integral to their marriage—and of the lines that she, as a woman, should not attempt to cross. But despite these threats, Claire again refuses to sleep with Stuart, choosing not to give in to him regardless of the potential for violence we know to be bubbling under his surface.

As Claire’s feelings of estrangement from Stuart increase, so do her feelings of closeness to the dead girl (whose body has been identified on the local news station as “Susan Miller”)—so much so that she decides to attend the girl’s funeral. The day before the funeral is scheduled to take place, Claire has an appointment with her hairdresser, a scene featured in both versions of the narrative to different extents. In the Lish version, Claire’s exchange with this other woman is given only eight lines of text:
Claire tells “Marnie” that she is “going to a funeral tomorrow,” and also that “It was a murder” (277). In the last line of their conversation, Marnie politely offers her apologies, and assures Claire that she’ll get her “fixed up” for the occasion (277).

However, in Carver’s original narrative, this scene contains an important benchmark in Claire’s psychological development. She asks the hairdresser (named “Millie” in this version), “do you ever wish you were somebody else, or else just nobody, nothing, nothing at all?” (876). Millie is understandably taken aback, and cannot commiserate, saying, “If I was somebody else I’d be afraid I might not like who I was” (876). Ironically, Millie’s response to Claire is very near the truth of Claire’s current apprehension: she is struggling to imagine herself as “somebody else”—someone other than the submissive wife and mother Stuart expects her to be—but is yet unsure of what the experience of that new identity would feel like.

The day of the funeral also occasions major differences between the two narratives. In both versions, Claire makes the drive to the funeral alone, and notices a man in a green pickup truck following her. Claire pulls off the road in hopes that he will pass by, but the driver of the truck pulls over as well, and asks if she needs help. Rather than regarding his inquiry as a friendly gesture, Claire finds the truck driver’s attention threatening and objectifying: “He looks at my breasts, my legs,” says the Claire of the Lish version. “I can tell that’s what he’s doing” (278). Here, though it is certainly possible the man is indeed looking at her this way, we suspect also that Claire’s newfound—or perhaps, rediscovered—fear of her husband has brought with it a sense of paranoia that has extended to other men she encounters.
Claire’s discomfort around men is given even greater emphasis in Carver’s manuscript. Before setting out on her drive to the funeral, Claire stops for gas, and is told by the male mechanic that going all the way to the town of Summit is “quite a drive for a woman” (877). As she pays Barry for the gasoline, Claire can “feel his eyes” on her; she leaves in a hurry, but looks back to “see him watching” (878). The green pickup truck is in this version of the story, as well; however, in addition the suggestive looks he gives in the Lish version, the driver echoes the mechanic’s sexist sentiment, telling Claire, “You know it’s not good for a woman to be batting around the country by herself” (879). Thus, rather than being upset exclusively by what she perceives to be these male characters’ objectifying gazes, the Claire of Carver’s original manuscript is also reacting to their misogynistic remarks—remarks that she may be considering the negative impact of for the first time.

The events that occur during the funeral scene are essentially the same from version to version: after the attendees “go past the casket,” Claire speaks with a woman who tells her the “consoling” news that the killer has been arrested. However, this information is not a consolation to Claire: she replies, “They have friends, these killers. You can tell” (279) in the Lish version, and, “He might not have acted alone…He might be covering up for someone, a brother, or some friends” in Carver’s original (881). In the original narrative, however, we are again privy to Claire’s interior dynamics; during the preacher’s remarks, she imagines Susan’s “journey down the river”:

…the nude body hitting rocks, caught at by branches, the body floating and turning, her hair streaming in the water. Then the hands and hair catching in the
overhanging branches, holding, until four men come along to stare at her. I can see a man who is drunk (Stuart?) take her by the wrist. Does anyone here know about that? What if these people knew that? I look around at the other faces.

There is a connection to be made of these things, these events, these faces, if I can find it. My head aches with the effort to find it. (880)

This return to direct identification with Susan is not in the Lish narrative, which ends shortly thereafter—and in a fashion remarkably different than the narrative in Carver’s manuscript.

The Lish version ends when Claire returns home from the funeral to Stuart, who—seeing that she is still upset—insists that he “knows just what [she] needs” (279). He reaches an arm around her waist and starts to undress her, and, despite what we have perceived to be her building refusal of him throughout the story, Claire acquiesces to Stuart’s advances:

“First things first,” he says.

He says something else. But I don’t need to listen. I can’t hear a thing with so much water going.

“That’s right,” I say, finishing the buttons myself. “Before Dean comes. Hurry.” (279)

Stuart makes the same sexual advances in the manuscript version of the text, but instead of giving in to him, the Claire of this narrative tells him to “stop, stop, stop” and “stamps on his toes” (882). She relates the disturbing incident that follows:
And then I am lifted up and then falling. I sit on the floor looking up at him and my neck hurts and my skirt is over my knees. He leans down and says, You go to hell, then, do you hear, bitch? I hope your cunt drops off before I touch it again. He sobs once and I realize he can’t help it, he can’t help himself either. I feel a rush of pity for him as he heads for the living room. (882)

After this violent incident, Carver’s narrative continues for an additional page. Stuart tries to smooth things over with flowers the next day, but when they are delivered, Claire feels threatened even by the delivery boy: “The boy looks at my robe, open at the throat, and touches his cap. He stands with his legs apart, feet firmly planted on the top step, as if asking me to touch him down there” (882). Claire moves her things into the “extra bedroom,” and, that night, Stuart makes another attempt to show his power over her: “Stuart breaks the lock on my door. He does it just to show me that he can, I suppose, for he does not do anything when the door springs open except stand there in his underwear looking surprised and foolish while the anger slips from his face” (882).

The version of the narrative ends with a call from Stuart; he tells Claire that he has invited his mother to come stay with them again, to which Claire responds that it “doesn’t matter one way or the other” (883). Stuart tells Claire that he loves her, after which we are given the last block of text in the narrative: “He says something else and I listen and nod slowly. I feel sleepy. Then I wake up and say, For God’s sake, Stuart, she was only a child” (883). For this version of Claire, there will be no getting past what has transpired with Stuart—and although she spent a great deal of the narrative expressing
her fear that it would not be possible, it seems that something in her life may “change,” after all.

These two versions of “So Much Water So Close to Home” have radically different effects on readerly experience, which may account for the incredible variety in the comparisons done by scholars of Carver’s work. While some critics find fault with the portrayal of Claire in the shorter narrative, others, such as Gunter Leypoldt and Keiko Arai, defend the narrative on aesthetic grounds. In “Reconsidering Raymond Carver’s ‘Development’: The Revisions of ‘So Much Water So Close to Home,’” Leypoldt insists that many find the Lish ending “baffling” simply because “they have failed to see the complexity of the metaphorical undercurrents that the water image emits” (Leypoldt 335). Leypoldt writes:

The subtlety and obliqueness with which Carver reintroduces the rape theme in the shorter version is striking: rather than having Claire reflect on her sense of being violated, he lets her be puzzled by the imaginary sound of water, which establishes a metaphorical connection with the girl’s rape and murder. (333)

In my view, what Leypoldt’s reading fails to see is that, despite the presence of the rape theme at the endings of both texts, there remains a fundamental difference between them: the Claire of the manuscript version fights back against her aggressor, while the Claire of the Lish version does not. Moreover, Leypoldt’s rhetoric throughout the article maintains an unsympathetic and reductive tone toward Claire, positing that her “sense-making is increasingly malfunctioning…making her color the world with expressionist projections of her own paranoid sense of being violated” (328) and, consequently, that
Stuart’s actions at the narrative’s end are really just “his attempts to show his empathy with sexual comforts” (333). These assertions smack of a blame-the-victim mentality that is especially troubling for a reader who takes the mimetic component of Claire’s character into account.

Keiko Arai’s analysis of the stories, “Who Controls the Narrative?: A Stylistic Comparison of Different Versions of Raymond Carver’s ‘So Much Water So Close to Home,’” is much less reductive of Claire’s situation, but focuses on what she identifies as the “stylistic” differences between the narratives. Arai gives a thorough analysis of textual elements such as sentence structure, paragraph length, and verb tenses to conclude that, due to the “degree of bias imposed by the narrator [of the longer narrative],” the Lish version “demands far more interpretative commitment from the reader”—commitment that requires “the reader’s imagination” (Arai 322). While I agree wholeheartedly with the supposition that matters of style have an important impact on the story being told, I would argue that it is not so difficult to “imagine” what the consequences of Claire’s final surrender to Stuart will be for her already-fragile sense of personhood.

In my experience, the differences between these narratives trigger distinct affective responses. Claire’s submission to Stuart at the end of the Lish narrative subverts what we have perceived as a moving away from the established power-dynamic in their marriage; in this version of the narrative, Claire abandons this progression entirely, giving up and giving in to the husband from whom she has spent the rest of the story trying to detach herself. This abandonment—serving as the
narrative’s final word—provokes an overwhelming sense of disappointment in any reader who has watched Claire’s challenging movement toward autonomy. This disappointment, in turn, provokes resentment toward the force responsible for Claire’s actions: namely, the implied author who has placed this woman in these circumstances and has had her meet this end.

The Claire of Carver’s original narrative, on the other hand, is given a depth of character that makes it possible to share in her experiences and understand her motivations: in short, we are invited to view Claire as a real woman with real problems and ambitions. Her ultimate refusal to recuperate the unjust balance of power in her marriage—a refusal to lock herself into a role she no longer wants to play—results in a different reading of her character altogether: her portrayal in this narrative provokes respect for her—and, in turn, for the implied author who gave her these characteristics. Consequently, upon completion of the original narrative, it is possible to make a positive ethical judgment of Claire as well as the implied author who created her.

This more humane treatment and representation of female characters in the manuscript version have significant effects on what we take to be the implied author’s statement about women at large. As Phelan explains in Reading People, Reading Plots:

…we are given a greater license for thematizing in literature; though we must remain wary of hasty jumps from trait to theme, we are likely to be invited to make more considered ones. Because literary characters are synthetic, their creators are likely to be doing something more than increasing the population, more than trying to bring another possible person into the world. They are likely
to be increasing the population in order to show us something about the segment of the population to which the created member belongs. (121)

As Chapter Three will show, the “segments of the population” represented—and misrepresented—by the narratives in question are not limited to female characters, but extend to the larger socioeconomic group upon which Carver’s narratives are based, as well.
As Chapter Two has illustrated, a view of character that factors in the mimetic component has the potential to facilitate an intensely personal experience of reading narrative. Moreover, considering the characters created by authors to be “possible people”—rather than synthetic constructs—can have substantial effects on what we take to be a narrative’s thematic statement about any larger groups to which those characters might belong. In the case of the stories attributed to Raymond Carver, the seeming patronization of the characters inhabiting his texts is not only an issue as it pertains to his female characters, but also to those in the segment of the population about which he most often writes: the members of the American lower-middle class. In this final chapter, it is the representation of this larger group in Carver’s published and manuscript texts that I would like to explore, as well as the effect of that representation on the ethical judgments we make as readers.

In Mark McGurl’s comprehensive study of postwar American fiction, *The Program Era* (2009), he devotes a chapter to the school of literature he terms “lower-middle-class modernism”—a school with which Raymond Carver is strongly associated. To explain the subject matter commonly depicted in lower-middle-class modernism, McGurl makes reference to what has come to be known as “Carver Country”: “the region of polluted rivers, little ranch houses, overflowing ashtrays, bars, old cars, and other artifacts of unglamorous life pictured in a handsomely bound
coffeetable book of photographs by that title” (McGurl 278). As McGurl explains, *Carver Country* (1990) was published

...in recognition of the unlikely beauty [Carver] tried to lend to such things—things that reflect neither the spiff of upper-class existence nor even what Arno J. Meyer calls the “romance of utter wretchedness,” but something floating uncomfortably in between. Carver Country was known to be located in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, where the writer originally came from and where he set many of stories, but its borders were shifting, stretching to encompass almost any overtly ordinary, obscurely hurtful American place.

(McGurl 279)

The “shifting borders” of Carver Country, as noted by McGurl, indicate that this place is not limited to a particular geographical location—it is more so a “region of the mind” (McGurl 281), a particular experiential and psychological condition shared by the members of America’s lower-middle-class. My aim in this chapter will be to explore Carver Country and the “possible people” who live there as portrayed through these two sets of texts. Rather than approaching these stories with a preconceived notion of what Carver Country looks like, I hope to glean from the narratives a sense of what living there feels like, paying particular attention to the role that speech and narration play in the shaping of that feeling.

To begin, let us consider an original narrative called “The Fling” and the Lish version of that narrative renamed “Sacks.” The two stories have more or less the same plot: a man, our character-narrator, meets his father at an airport bar and has a
conversation with him regarding the father’s disastrous extra-marital affair. At the end of both versions, having left the bar to board his flight, the narrator realizes he has forgotten the sack of gifts his father asked him to take back to his own wife and family in the airport lounge. While the content of these narratives remains largely intact from version to version, there are differences at work on the level of discourse—especially in terms of our narrator’s relationship to his narration—that deserve a closer look.

One difference of this kind has to do with the narratees that are a part of the narrative communication in each version. “All narration,” writes Gerald Prince in “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee” (1973), “presupposes not only (at least) one narrator but also (at least) one narratee, the narratee being someone whom the narrator addresses” (Prince 226). The narratee may remain nameless—like the one we encounter in the narrative in question—but we are nevertheless able to locate him based on various signals by the narrator, such as direct addresses, questions, or what Prince calls “over-justifications” in and about the narration (233).

Keeping these guidelines in mind, we can locate a narratee within the first several paragraphs of both versions of this narrative. Observe the second paragraph of the Lish version, which reads:

I want to pass along to you a story my father told me when I stopped over in Sacramento last year. It concerns some events that involved him two years before that time, that time being before he and my mother were divorced. (244)

In addition to providing some informative exposition for the story, this short paragraph gives us the beginnings of a picture of a specific narratee. Whomever the “you”
specified might be, we know from this direct address that he or she is someone to whom the narrator wishes to impart a message through the story.

However, this paragraph in the original version is considerably more telling. Instead of merely informing the narratee that he is about to relay a story, the narrator in the original makes what feels like an over-justification about telling this tale:

> It could be asked that if it is important enough to warrant the telling—my time and energy, your time and energy—then why haven’t I told it before this? I’d have no answer for that. In the first place, I don’t know if it is that important—at least to anyone except my father and the others involved. Secondly, and perhaps more to the point, what business is it of mine? (788)

This passage makes clear that this narrator and his narratee differ markedly from those in the Lish version. While both narrators single out a narratee to whom the telling is addressed, the narrator in this version seems much more anxious and affected by the fact that he is telling at all. I see this as an indication of the trend Elliott Malamet has indentified in Carver’s narratives as the “fear of narration,” a sense that his narrators are “in conflict with the very notion of telling their tales” (Malamet 60).

The sense of a dialogue between narrator and narratee is much more heightened throughout the entirety of the original Carver text, whereas the Lish version does not foreground this aspect of the discourse. Nowhere is this difference in the role of the narratee more noticeable than at the narratives’ ends. At the close of the Lish version, after the narrator realizes he has forgotten the sack of candy and other trinkets from his father, he concludes his address to the narratee with the following: “Just as well. Mary
didn’t need candy, Almond Roca or anything else. That was last year. She needs it now even less” (250). These final lines of narration are puzzling, as this does seem not like an essential piece of information to be divulging to the narratee. Since the narrative ends here, a tension in the discourse is left unresolved: we remain unaware of the reasons this narrator may have had for attempting to communicate something to a particular listener. In any case, the narrator of this version is ultimately as unsuccessful at meaningful communication with his narratee as he was with his father—and, similarly, the authorial audience is not sure what to make of the implied author’s choice to end this way.

As it happens, the original version of the text ends on a much different note than the unfaftering indifference of the Lish version. Carver’s original ends after the narrator has walked his father out to a cab, asking him to “Take it easy now and write, will you, Dad?” (803). Immediately thereafter, the narrator ends his address to the narratee with the following revelation:

He hasn’t written, I haven’t heard from him since then. I’d write to him and see how he’s getting along, but I’m afraid I’ve lost his address. But, tell me, after all, what could he expect from someone like me? (803)

Unlike the ending of the Lish version, this one is rife with interpretive possibilities, especially in terms of how it affects our understanding of the narrator’s conflict with his narration.

I would suggest that this is one occasion on which, as Prince states, “we must study the narratee in order to discover a narrative’s fundamental thrust” (Prince 240). In
the original, the narrator’s telling is emphasized as a conscious decision, and we have a
clearer picture of the narratee as someone whose judgments the narrator is not only
conscious of, but is concerned about. Though this narrative ends with a question—
usually one of the most open-ended ways to leave off—contained in this question is
something absent from the Lish ending: a tone of desperation, a yearning to understand
and be understood that is reminiscent of Ann Weiss’s predicament in “The Bath.”
However, in “The Fling,” this desire for communication is made most obvious in the
discourse, and is absent from the Lish version in which the story is told differently.

These differences at the level of the telling occur continually throughout a
comparison of the two collections. To explore this issue further, I’d like to turn to one
of the stories Carver was unequivocally determined to keep from being published as
Lish had edited it: “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit,” which had originally been titled “Where
Is Everyone?” (Stull and Carrol 995). The Lish version differs from the original in
many of the ways discussed in the previous chapters: it is shorter, due in part to the loss
of a great deal of its mimetic development of character; it has a change in title from one
that is logical to one that seems entirely arbitrary (“Mr. Fixit” referring to an important
character, and “Mr. Coffee” referring to an inconsequential kitchen device that is by no
means developed as symbolically significant); and its ending is transformed into one
that “shuts the door” on the narrative much earlier than in the original. By removing the
original ending of this story, the implied author of the Lish narrative not only detracts
from the content in the story plane, but alters what was originally an important aspect of
the narrator’s rhetorical purpose, as well.
At the end of Lish’s “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit,” our unnamed narrator, who is recounting the events of the story from several years after they take place, is at home with his wife, Myrna, who has just “come home” from an ambiguous location (233). Their marriage, as the narrator makes clear, has been one of constant infidelity on both sides, with a supporting cast of complicated relations: unhappy and unruly children, Myrna’s troubled lover, Ross, and the narrator’s promiscuous mother. Taking this marital mayhem into account, it seems relatively insignificant that the narrative closes with a scene between the narrator and his wife wherein he suggests that they “hug awhile” and then she can make them “a real nice supper” (233). Though the couple may be physically “back together,” it is difficult to read this scene between them as a real reconciliation or change in their attitudes or behavior; rather, it seems to suggest that they are doomed to remain in the state of perpetual dysfunction that the narrator has spent the rest of the story chronicling for us.

At the end of Carver’s original version, however, the narrator finds himself not with his wife (who in this version is named Cynthia), but with his mother, who welcomes him home with a kiss and fixes him a bed on the couch. This development in the progression not only reinforces the strong oedipal overtones that have been coursing through the narrative, but also confirms another theme we have felt building in the text: the analogy between the narrator and his father, who “died in his sleep, drunk,” eight years before (768). This analogy is the basis for the powerful effect of Carver’s original ending: the narrator is lying on the couch, drunk, in the house where his father died, when suddenly, as he relates: “I woke up with a start, the pajamas damp with sweat. A
snowy light filled the room. There was a roaring coming at me. The room clamored. I lay there. I didn’t move” (771). This radically different ending is “epiphanic” on two levels: just as the narrator seems to be having a serious realization about what the consequences of his lifestyle might end up being, we, in the authorial audience, suddenly realize that there might be more of a distance between the narrator as past-tense character and the narrator as present-tense narrator than we were previously lead to believe.

We can return to Peter Rabinowitz’s *Before Reading* to help make sense of the differences between these two endings. I see Carver’s ending as one Rabinowitz might call a “deceptive cadence,” a term taken from music to refer to endings that don’t just surprise us but seem to “flagrantly defy” what has come before them (305). Rabinowitz explains that this kind of ending

…jolts the authorial audience into questioning the validity of the moral it expected…because, by the general rule of conclusive endings, readers are invited to revise their understanding of the beginning of the text so that the ending, which at first seems a surprise, turns out to be in fact prefigured. (305)

Often, as Rabinowitz points out, the authorial audience will “thematize” this kind of ending so that it becomes representative of the meaning of the work as a whole. In this way, a narrative that seemed to be making a particular statement about its characters could, by ending with a “deceptive cadence,” end up challenging the reader’s initial assumptions about those characters and the situations in which they are placed.
If we follow this logic with the manuscript version of this text, the narrator’s implied change at the end of the story, although not explicitly qualified by him in the discourse to his narrative audience, seems to imply that the occasion for his telling goes beyond mere lyric progression: this narrative is one of process, not of stasis. This reading makes clearer sense of the fact that he is narrating these events from several years in the future; we can read his narration in this version as one distanced from the turbulence of his alcoholic years, a narration perhaps intended to communicate a critique of his former self. Although we do not by any means get a comprehensive picture of his present circumstances, the narrative at least allows for the possibility of envisioning him as a more stable, and maybe even recovered, individual.

In my view, this ending is certainly the more interesting of the two: it retains a sense of intriguing ambiguity, while at the same time widening the scope of what can be imagined for the narrator beyond a trajectory of unrelenting dysfunction and despair. Like “The Fling,” “Where is Everyone?” displays a narrator who achieves something through his narration—although neither is definitively “happy,” both original narrative endings show their narrators moving in the direction of some kind of meaningful development.

“One More Thing,” the final story in both versions of the collection, is one cited by Giles Harvey as an exemplar of the kind of over-sentimentality that makes him most thankful for Lish’s edits. The narrative opens with instabilities similar to others in the collection: an alcoholic and abusive husband, L.D., is being thrown out of his house by
his wife, Maxine, while their teenage daughter looks on. The ending of this narrative as it appears in Carver’s manuscript reads:

L.D. put the shaving bag under his arm again and once more picked up the suitcase. “I just want to say one more thing, Maxine. Listen to me. Remember this,” he said. “I love you. I love you no matter what happens. I love you too, Bea. I love you both.” He stood there at the door and felt his lips begin to tingle as he looked at them for what, he believed, might be the last time. “Good-bye,” he said. (952-53)

One certainly feels a sense of creeping sentimentality in this goodbye sequence, but it is mild compared to what follows:

“You call this love, L.D.?” Maxine said. She let go of Bea’s hand. She made a fist. Then she shook her head and jammed her hands into her coat pockets. She stared at him and then dropped her eyes to something on the floor near his shoes.

It came to him with a shock that he would remember this night and her like this. He was terrified to think that in the years ahead she might come to resemble a woman he couldn’t place, a mute figure in a long coat, standing in the middle of a lighted room with lowered eyes.

“Maxine!” he cried. “Maxine!”

“Is this what love is, L.D.?” she said, fixing her eyes on him. Her eyes were terrible and deep, and he held them as long as he could. (953)

Harvey’s comparison of this ending to the “weightless intensity of a soap opera” (Harvey 39) is difficult to refute. Indeed, it is easy to picture this scene in the kind of
daytime television drama that would score very poorly on a test of overall aesthetic value. As one might expect, almost all of this exchange was excised through Lish’s edits, leaving only the following lines:

L.D. put the shaving bag under his arm and picked up the suitcase.

He said, “I just want to say one more thing.”

But then he could not think what it could possibly be. (326)

Though the Lish ending has an undeniable aesthetic neatness that is missing from Carver’s original, the implicit problem I find in the editing of these lines has more to do with the sense that, in the published collection at large, it seems that it was necessary to rob these fictional creations of their ability to engage in effective discourse. For this story specifically, it is not the case that Carver’s original ending rescues L.D. from a negative ethical judgment from us; in both narratives, he is a deadbeat husband and father who is insinuated to be both physically and emotionally abusive to his wife and daughter. Nonetheless, I take issue with Harvey’s ultimate favoring of the Lish ending on the grounds that a man like L.D. “would forget what he had to say. A lifetime of bungling, failure, humiliation, and deceit seems to be disclosed in a single moment” (Harvey 39).

It is exactly this idea—that the moments of narrative in which the residents of Carver Country fail to produce words with which to express themselves should inform our perceptions of their personhood—that I find to be incredibly problematic as it pertains to a readerly interpretation of this theme. As Malamet explains:
In the face of the speaker’s fear of narration the reader is left with two interpretive options: to treat other textual items surrounding the narrator as suggestive of his condition, or to avoid the temptation to weave an organized web from the scarce narrative clues offered and simply to accept the story as a self contained entity that deliberately obscures any hermeneutical exterior of its surface presentation. (Malamet 69)

Since moments such as these populate almost every story in the Lish version of the collection, it would be difficult to follow the second of Malamet’s interpretive suggestions and “avoid the temptation to weave an organized web” of what the collection seems to be suggesting about these characters on the whole. The characters in the Lish collection are consistently depicted as bewildered, speechless, tongue-tied—seemingly too unintelligent to articulate their complex thoughts and emotions—and always at the moments when it is most crucial for them to speak.

To be sure, difficulty in communicating is one of the most prevalent themes in Carver’s manuscript of this text; however, in Lish’s edited versions, this difficulty seems to be transformed with consistency into a total inability. As the three textual examples above show, silence—or a lack of meaningful words that renders the effect of silence—gets the “last word” in a number of the Lish versions. This, in turn, encourages readers to interpret the inability to express oneself through language—and, indeed, the ability to be aware of the potentially transformative power of telling one’s story—as a shared trait of the individuals the collection portrays.
If the foregrounding of this silence—in place of the more complex relations to speech and narration we see in the manuscript—was the implied author of the Lish version’s way of asserting something about the larger human condition, this ambition is complicated by the understanding that these stories generally depict a particular group of people: namely, the American lower-middle-class. Lish’s consistently unflattering depiction of these characters makes it difficult to avoid interpreting an essentializing statement from the narrative about the condition of the particular socioeconomic class to which they presumably belong.

Indeed, from the narratives in the Lish version, one gets the impression that the residents of Carver Country are intended to be condescended to—that we are meant to view them in a certain simplistic light that evokes contempt or pity rather than compassion. Like the treatment of female characters discussed in the previous chapter, the implied author’s choice to represent the residents of Carver Country in this way has ethical and political implications that affect not only our judgment of the narratives, but our judgments of that implied author, as well.
CONCLUSION

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT RAYMOND CARVER

When considered on the whole, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love and Beginners are two very different collections—in matters of both form and content—that result in two very different narrative experiences. If we use the model of communication provided by the rhetorical approach to narrative to trace these narratives back to their creators, we get a clear impression of two distinct implied authors behind the construction of these texts. As long as we stay within the perimeters of the boxed portion of Chatman’s model—that is, among the members of this communication within the “narrative text”—a comparison of these two collections can attempt doing justice to their complexities of difference without getting controversial. However, as indicated in the Introduction, Raymond Carver’s particular case renders it nearly impossible to avoid the implications of comparative studies for the participants in narrative communication who are outside the “box,” as well: the real author and real reader.

In the “real” world, flesh-and-blood readers are walking into bookstores every day to purchase copies of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, a collection of stories by the man they understand to be the flesh-and-blood Raymond Carver. And despite the wide-spread awareness of the Carver-Lish controversy, scholars continue to refer to the stories in WWTA as “Carver’s typical texts” (Leypoldt 531), to say nothing of the still-rampant use of adjectives like “Carverian” or “Carveresque” to denote the incredibly minimal style associated with that volume. At very least, this confusion
suggests a serious problem of signification, best posed as the question: What do we talk about when we talk about Raymond Carver?

Reassessing the texts of Raymond Carver through this manuscript occasions a renegotiation of several common referents signified by his name. Chief among these is the movement to which he is most often tethered, literary “minimalism,” and all the formal traits it is understood to entail. Many scholars have already taken up this debate, usually engaging in discussions regarding the relationship between presence and absence in the texts. The findings of these authors are essential to a discussion of what constitutes a minimalist aesthetic, as *WWTA* remains heavily cited as the quintessential text of this kind. If *WWTA* is our example of “zero-degree” minimalism, praised for its economy and used widely as a formula for the production of short fiction in creative writing programs far and wide, perhaps it is time to reevaluate whose name is attached to that tag.

While these manuscript texts certainly speak back to the larger context of their publication, I think they might also have something to say back to the concepts from narrative theory I have been using to analyze them. While I view the implied author as a necessary and effective concept for understanding the multilayered communicative situation inherent in a text, cases such as this one challenge that concept’s effectiveness. Whereas it is usually acceptable to put distance between the real and the implied author by a simple insertion of the word “implied” before that author’s name, this distinction

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cannot account for the added level of complexity in this particular situation. Of course, as Chatman makes clear, there can be multiple implied authors that correspond to one real author—in the case of early versus late stories or novels, for instance—but what happens when two separate implied authors can be extracted from two versions the “same” story, both of which bear a single author’s name? Is this only an issue when we have biographical insights about intent, as we do here? In any case, making claims about the choices of the “implied Carver” seems deeply problematic when it comes to analyzing the stories from the WWTA as it was first published.

It seems similarly problematic to determine what might be thought of as Carver’s “implied reader” based on the textual evidence provided by the published WWTA alone. As we have seen, the different versions of this text treat many of the same themes, but in very different ways; thus, the implied reader of a “Lished” Carver text would be one looking for a much different experience of narrative than the implied reader of a “Carver” Carver text. This logic, too, extends beyond the domain of the narrative text, as it is easy to imagine the confusion of a real reader who, encouraged to read “Carver” by a friend or colleague, mistakenly reads the version of a story intended for a reader with radically different likes, expectations, and ethical positioning.

Regardless of our personal judgments of Carver, Lish, or any of the other “real” individuals involved, the impact of these manuscript texts on our understanding of twentieth-century American literature cannot be denied or dismissed. Carver was both correct and incorrect in his suspicion that publishing WWTA as Lish had revised it would have “permanent” consequences, as the stories with which he has for so long
been associated are now beginning to come unloosed from his name. Since these texts have now been made available to us in full, we ought to do them the justice of a close examination—and, if necessary, to bring that examination to bear on whatever it is we talk about when we talk about Raymond Carver.


---. "Carver's 'Mr. Coffee And Mr. Fixit'." *Explicator* 67.2 (2009): 146-152. Print.

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