Errand Study Guide

Errand by Raymond Carver

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Introduction

"Errand" originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in June 1987. It is the last story Raymond Carver wrote and is included in his collection of short stories *Where I'm Calling From,* published just a few months before Carver died in 1988. It was also included in *The Best American Stories, 1988* and received first prize in *Prize Stories 1988: The O. Henry Awards.* A partly fictionalized account of Russian writer Anton Chekhov's death, "Errand" is unlike any other Carver story. Carver claimed that he was inspired to write the story while reading Henri Troyat' s biography of Chekhov, one of Carver' s literary idols. The narrative voice of "Errand" is that of a historian, appropriate for a historical story but unusual for Carver in that he seldom wrote explicitly about famous people or mixed fact and fiction in such an obvious manner. Carver details Chekhov's descent into illness and his eventual death in the Black Forest town of Badenweiler, Germany in 1904. With Chekhov in bed dying, his wife, Olga Knipper, sends a Russian bellboy on an errand to secure a mortician, hence the story's title.

Carver draws on a number of historical sources including Chekhov's own writing, Chekhov's sister Maria Chekhov's *Memoirs,* Leo Tolstoy's journals, and Troyat's biography. Through writing an imaginative account of a well-known person's death, Carver provokes readers to think about the relationship between literature and history and to imagine how they would respond to another person's death. Critics consider "Errand" to be one of Carver's best stories and one that will stand the test of time.

Author Biography

Raymond Carver's spare, realistic stories about the hardscrabble lives of the working class are rooted in his own experience. Born in Clatskanie, Oregon, May 25, 1938, to Clevie Raymond Carver and Ella Beatrice Casey, Carver was raised in Yakima, Washington. His father, who suffered from alcoholism, worked in a sawmill, and the family was often financially strapped. A combination of marital difficulties, heavy drinking, and poverty contributed to Clevie Carver's emotional breakdown in 1957. That year, Raymond married sixteen-year-old Maryann Burk, and they had their first child, Christine LaRae Carver, who was born in the same hospital in which Carver's father was being treated. Their second child, Vance Lindsay, was born a year later. Carver was only twenty years old, but already he had two children. He was destined to repeat the pattern of his father's life: drinking heavily, working in low-paying jobs, and moving his family frequently.

Carver writes that his children were the single biggest influence on his writing. The second biggest was the novelist John Gardner with whom Carver studied at Chico State College in 1959. Gardner provided the encouragement and discipline to write that Carver needed at that point in his life. Always looking for a better way to support his wife and two children as well as stronger opportunities for himself, Carver moved his family around in the next few years, taking a job at a sawmill in Eureka, California, before moving to Arcata, California, where he enrolled at Humboldt State University. In 1963, he graduated with a degree in English, then moved his family to Iowa City to begin graduate work at the Iowa Writer's Workshop.

During the 1960s, Carver worked at a number of jobs including hospital custodian and editor for a textbook company. In 1970, Carver was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Discovery Award for poetry, and his first book, *Winter Insomnia,* was published by Kayak Books. Although plagued by financial difficulties, continuing marital problems,and alcoholism, Carver continued writing and garnering recognition for his work. The year 1977, when Carver stopped drinking, was a watershed year in the writer's life. The following year he met Tess Gallagher, who was to become his second wife, and with her help he managed to turn his personal life around.

Carver's many awards include a Wallace E. Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, a National Book Award nomination, and a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. In 1984, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters granted him one of its first Mildred and Harold Strauss "Livings" awards, effectively freeing him from having to teach. Carver's last four years of life were especially productive. In addition to publishing *Where I'm Calling From* (1988), which includes his last story "Errand," Carver edited a number of anthologies and published three collections of poems: *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* (1985), *This Water* (1985), and *Ultramarine* (1986).

In 1987, Carver, who once described himself as "a cigarette with a body attached to it," was diagnosed with lung cancer, and a year later, on August 2, 1988, he died.

Plot Summary

Part One

Carver begins "Errand" by relating an incident that occurred in 1897, when Chekhov dined with his wealthy friend Alexei Suvorin in Moscow. At the dinner, Chekhov begins hemorrhaging and is taken to a clinic where the famous Russian writer Leo Tolstoy visits him. Carver includes this detail to underscore the difference between Tolstoy's approach to writing and Chekhov's and to highlight Chekhov's celebrity and importance as an artist. Carver integrates writing by characters *about* other characters in his story, which can sometimes be confusing because of the formal manner in which Russians address one another. For example, Maria Chekhov refers to her brother Anton Chekhov as Anton Pavlovich, and Chekhov refers to Leo Tolstoy as Lev Nikolayevich. This section provides background for the rest of the story, which takes place seven years later. Readers learn that Chekhov has tuberculosis but also that he does not take the disease as seriously as he should.

Part Two

This section takes readers ahead seven years to 1904. Carver writes that Chekhov has gone to the German spa town of Badenweiler "to die." In reportorial fashion, Carver introduces Chekhov's wife, Olga Knipper, and the doctors who treat Chekhov. Chekhov's condition deteriorates, and Dr. Schwöhrer, a doctor specializing in treating celebrities and famous people, is summoned when Chekhov becomes "delirious." When Schwöhrer determines that Chekhov has but minutes to live, he orders a bottle of the hotel's best champagne, which is delivered by a young hotel employee who has been roused from sleep.

Part Three

Schwöhrer dismisses the young man who brings the champagne and then opens the bottle and pours three glasses. Chekhov takes a sip from his glass, rolls over and stops breathing. Schwöhrer pronounces him dead. Ominously, "A large, black-winged moth flew through a window and banged wildly against the electric lamp." This sentence appears, almost verbatim, in Troyat's account as well. Knipper declines the doctor's offer of medication to calm her nerves, but she does request a few hours alone with her husband's body before authorities are told of his death. After Schwöhrer leaves, the cork pops back out of the champagne bottle. When Carver writes that Schwöhrer "left the room and, for that matter, history," he is writing figuratively. He means that for all intents and purposes, Schwöhrer's part in Chekhov's story is over. History will only remember him for his part in a famous writer's death. The section ends with champagne pouring out of the bottle while Knipper strokes her husband's face. The image itself is suggestive of life pouring out of Chekhov's body and of Knipper's grief.

Part Four

The young man who brought the champagne returns in the morning, surprising Knipper. He is oblivious to what has happened, saying that he has come to collect the tray and champagne bottle and to announce changes in the breakfast schedule. Readers see the hotel room through this young man's eyes, as he takes it in while talking to Knipper. The scene between Knipper and the young man is presented in almost slow-motion fashion as Carver details seemingly insignificant actions such as the young man clearing his throat, but all of these details help to evoke the tension between Knipper and the young man and the presence of death in the room. Carver makes the same point with this young man as he did with Schwöhrer: he will be remembered only for his part in Chekhov's story. However, in the young man's case, being consigned to oblivion is ironic because he is a fictional character created by Carver. The title of the story is derived from this section, as Knipper sends the young man on an "errand" to find a mortician for her husband's body. The young man does not know who Chekhov is, only that these people are important foreign guests.

The last few pages of the story detail Knipper's instructions to the young man. He never actually leaves the room. The young man walking down the street carrying the vase of roses (symbolic of Chekhov himself) and the description of the young man meeting the mortician are all part of Knipper's imagination; they are what she wants the young man to focus on during his errand. This visualization technique makes sense coming from Knipper, an actress. Readers are jolted out of Knipper's fantasy by the young man picking up the cork, which had popped from the champagne bottle. This seemingly mundane image underscores the prosaic nature of death and the ways in which grief can and cannot be expressed and shared.

Characters

Anton Chekhov

Anton Chekhov, whom his sister also refers to as Anton Pavlovich, is the subject of "Errand." Chekhov was born in the Ukraine in 1860, the son of working-class parents. A physician as well as a writer, Chekhov was celebrated for his realistic portrayals of middle-class Russians. Unlike other writers and intellectuals in Russia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chekhov often refused to take positions on political matters, instead choosing to represent his characters in all of their complexity and contradictions. His popularity as a short story writer and playwright continue today. Though widely celebrated as a gifted writer by the Russian literary public during his life, Chekhov was largely unknown to the rest of the world until after World War I when his works were translated into English.

Carver uses excerpts from Chekhov's diary, and readers learn about the details of his life and illness through others, including his sister Maria, his wife Olga Knipper, Leo Tolstoy, and Doctor Schöhrer. All of the characters, without exception, admire Chekhov and consider him a great man. Chekhov, the character, exists in Carver's story as a sun, around whom others orbit. The structure of the story reveals Carver's own sense that human beings derive meaning in their lives only through their relationship to others.

Maria Chekhov

Maria Chekhov is Anton Chekhov's younger sister. She makes a brief appearance in the story, visiting her brother in the hospital. Readers learn about the severity of Chekhov's illness through her diary entry, which Carver embellishes to more vividly present the atmosphere of Chekhov's hospital room.

Olga Knipper

Olga Knipper is Chekhov's wife, who is present at Chekhov's death. Carver periodically quotes from Chekhov's letters to her and from her own diaries. Carver tells readers that Chekhov met her in 1889 at rehearsals for *The Seagull,* a play by Chekhov. They married three years later in Moscow. Carver writes, "She was talented, pretty, and almost ten years younger than Chekhov." The writer's affection for her is underscored by the list of nicknames he has for her, including "pony," "puppy," and "little turkey." She summons Dr. Schöhrer when Chekhov is dying and, later, sends a young man on an "errand" for a mortician after her husband dies. Her detailed and measured instructions to the young man are loaded with symbolic imagery. Telling him to visualize what he is doing, Knipper says, "he should imagine himself as someone moving down the busy sidewalk carrying in his arms a porcelain vase of roses that he had to deliver to an important man." The roses symbolize Chekhov himself.

Anton Pavlovich

See Anton Chekhov

Dr. Schwöhrer

Dr. Schwöhrer is the doctor who last treats Chekhov and who pronounces him dead. Carver describes Dr. Schwöhrer as "one of the many Badenweiler physicians who earned a good living by treating the well-to-do who came to the spa seeking relief from various maladies." The young man who brings the champagne that Schwöhrer orders once he realizes that there is no hope for Chekhov sees the doctor as a "big imposing man with a thick moustache." The doctor's fictionalized telephone call sets in motion the part of Chekhov's death most embellished by Carver: the champagne scene. Schwöhrer has read Chekhov's stories, but he never mentions this while treating the writer. He is polite, formal, and respectful to Olga Knipper and to Chekhov.

Alexei Suvorin

Alexei Suvorin is a rich publisher and friend of Chekhov's who is dining with Chekhov when the writer has the first of his hemorrhages. The incident is historically accurate, and Suvorin's appearance in Carver's story provides "Errand" with background and historical credibility, which Carver builds upon throughout the story. Though readers are not told so in the story, Chekhov's friendship with Suvorin began in 1886 when Suvorin invited him to become a regular contributor for the St. Petersburg daily *Novoe vremya,* which Suvorin owned. Chekhov's friendship with Suvorin ended in 1898 in a dispute over politics. Suvorin's appearance in "Errand" also helps to establish Chekhov as a man of manners and taste. The incident in which he appears occurs in 1897, seven years before Chekhov dies and the bulk of the story takes place. Chekhov's denial to Suvorin that anything is seriously wrong with him positions him as a tragic figure who had difficulty admitting the gravity of his situation.

Leo Tolstoy

Leo Tolstoy is one of Russia's most famous writers, authoring such works as *War and Peace* (1868), *Confession* (1884), *What Then Must We Do ?* (1886), and *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1894). He died in 1910. He visits Chekhov in the hospital after Chekhov falls ill. Carver tells readers, "The hospital staff were awed to find themselves in the presence of the country's greatest writer." Carver uses Tolstoy's appearance as a way of commenting on the differences between the two writer's styles (Tolstoy was a mystic and a moralist, Chekhov a realist), their view of the afterlife (Tolstoy believed in it, Chekhov did not), and as a way of deepening the tragic nature of Chekhov's illness. Carver includes excerpts from Tolstoy's diary of his visit to Chekhov to further bolster the historical aspect of his story. The distinctions that Carver describes between the two writers are also distinctions that apply to Carver's own writing. Like Chekhov, Carver

was a realist, concerned with representing his characters' lives without the moralizing so popular with some fiction writers.

Young man

The young man appears in the story twice. The first time he brings the champagne that Schwöhrer ordered and is quickly dismissed. The second time, he arrives a few hours after Chekhov's death with three yellow flowers, saying that he has come to pick up the tray and ice bucket and to announce the breakfast schedule. He is very polite, formal, and eager to please and, readers are told, he has had very little experience serving important guests. Carver uses this character to underscore the mundane details of death, how in its aftermath there are practical things that need to be done. While the young man is speaking to Olga Knipper, she is lost in thought; while she is speaking to him, he is lost in thought, concerned about the cork that has popped out of the champagne bottle and is now on the floor. The last image of the story belongs to this young man, who finally picks up the cork and closes it in his hand.

Themes

Imagination

What makes "Errand" a short story instead of a historical essay is the use of imagination as a literary device. Carver not only adds the character of the young blonde man to the roster of historical characters, but his narrator imagines what he and other characters are thinking, seeing, and feeling during their interactions with one another. For example, the scene in which Dr. Schwöhrer sends for a bottle of champagne is historically accurate and documented by Chekhov biographer Henri Troyat. However, the details about Schwöhrer's phone call and the expression on the doctor's face are Carver taking dramatic license with history.

By adding imaginative elements to historical facts and information, Carver creates a hybrid literary form that some critics refer to as creative nonfiction. The introduction of imagination as a part of a historical account, however, also begs the question as to what kind of writing constitutes the truth, or even if *any* kind of writing can accurately embody truth. Literature constitutes a form of writing that focuses more on the emotional or imaginative truth than the kind of factual truth usually ascribed to historians. After Chekhov dies, the point of view in Carver's story changes to Knipper, and readers have access to her thoughts. Shifting from an omniscient narrator to a third-person narrator changes the tone of the story itself and tells readers they are squarely in the land of imagination. Knipper's point of view, however, as imagined by Carver, holds as much (emotional) truth as any diary excerpt in the story.

Death

The idea of the "good death" is a staple idea in literature *and* the human imagination. People often fantasize about not only when they will die but how. For the ancient Greeks, dying in battle for the greater good was viewed as a good death. For Christians, having the opportunity to repent for their sins and to ask forgiveness is a primary ingredient for having a good death. For Carver, rewriting a historical account of his literary idol's death helped him to imagine what his own might be like. Carver's description of Chekhov's death is unromanticized. He shaped facts about the Russian's death into a form that he could understand, one replete with details not included in historical accounts. By "fleshing out" Troyat's account of Chekhov's death, Carver literally makes the story his own. Chekhov knew he was dying. He refused oxygen, saying that he would be dead by the time it arrived. Because readers learn earlier in the story that Chekhov did not believe in an afterlife, his behavior at the time of his death is almost heroic, in a prosaic way. He takes a sip of champagne, rolls over, and stops breathing. This "good death" is described in a matter-of-fact manner with no sentimentalizing. Carver underscores the ordinariness of death, how it's both natural and unavoidable, in the story's final image. The young bellboy, with whom Chekhov's wife has been speaking (spinning her own fantasy of what would happen when the

young man left to seek a mortician), picks up the cork from the champagne bottle. He had been only half listening to Knipper; he is more concerned with the present than the future or the past. Life goes on, Carver's story suggests.

Style

Point of View

In "Errand" Carver employs an omniscient narrator who, in word choice, tone, and perspective, embodies the voice of a historian. An omniscient narrator has access to the thoughts and actions of all the characters in a story and hovers, godlike, over the story. Historians use this point of view to create an objective, truthful representation of events. They reveal information to the reader that characters do not yet know. Carver uses this point of view to effect an authoritative tone, as well as to allow himself artistic license with this point of view later in the story when he imagines the scene between Olga Knipper and the young man. By incorporating so much historical information, in the form of diary entries and quotations from memoirs and biographies, Carver effectively questions the boundaries between what makes an essay and what makes a short story.

Realism

"Errand" contains an example of literary realism. Realism strives for an objective presentation of the everyday life of a period or place and focuses primarily on the empirical world rather than the subjective moods or feelings of characters. Realistic writers also strive to accurately represent the ways in which characters speak and behave in a given place and time. For example, Carver's dramatization of Dr. Schwöhrer using the telephone to call for a bottle of champagne realistically depicts the way a person would make a phone call in 1904.

Historical Context

Widely considered the father of the short story form, Chekhov was perhaps the biggest literary influence of Carver's life. Critics frequently hail Carver's "Chekhovian" vision and draw attention to the parallels between the two writers' style and subject matter. William Stull, for example, writes, "Like Chekhov, Carver knew intimately the marginal lives of hardship and squalor from which he crafted luminous stories of empathy, endangerment, and hard-won affirmation." It is both fitting and ironic that "Errand" was the last story that Carver wrote before he died. Carver himself says that he was inspired to write the story after reading Troyat's account of Chekhov's death in his biography on the Russian writer. In his essay "On Errand" in *No Heroics, Please,* Carver writes, "I thought I saw an opportunity to pay homage—if I could bring it off, do it rightly and honorably—to Chekhov, the writer who has meant so much to me for such a long time." Like Chekhov, Carver died young, Chekhov at forty-four, Carver barely fifty, both of diseases afflicting their lungs.

Chekhov, of course, succumbed to tuberculosis, a disease with a long history and one that, at the end of the nineteenth century, had become an international epidemic. Not identified as a bacillus (a disease-producing bacterium) until the end of the nineteenth century, tuberculosis, or TB, confounded doctors (of which Chekhov was one), who were at a loss for how to treat the disease; some doctors tried collapsing lungs while others removed ribs. Ointments, salves, potions, and herbs were all tried to no avail. In 1895, the X ray was invented, which helped to diagnose those with TB immediately. Such machines, however, were expensive and not always available. Note Maria Chekhov's anguish at seeing a physician's freehand sketch of her brother's diseased lungs when she visits him. This method was common before the advent of the X-ray machine to show patients what doctors believed was taking place inside of them. By the twentieth century, time, rest, and diet were the most widely prescribed treatments, as illustrated by Chekhov's move to Badenweiler, Germany, to convalesce. In 1924, a TB vaccine was discovered, and by the 1940s, streptomycin in combination with other antibiotics helped defeat the disease although this treatment was available primarily in developed countries. By the 1980s, however, new drug-resistant strains of TB sprung up around the world, and in the 1990s New York City experienced a mini-epidemic of tuberculosis. According to the World Health Organization, almost two billion people worldwide are infected with TB, though only 5 percent of those might develop active TB in their life.

When Chekhov left for Badenweiler in 1904, Russia was in turmoil. Engaged in a war against Japan, which it lost, Russia was forced to abandon its expansionist policy in the Far East, giving up Korea, the Liaodong Peninsula, and Sakhalin Island. The heavy losses from the war angered Russians, as did high wartime taxes. As a result, the country rebelled against Czar Nicholas II. Massive strikes and peasant demonstrations spread across the country. After government troops shot and killed hundreds of peaceful demonstrators outside the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg in 1905, the country plunged into chaos. By conceding to create a democratically elected parliament—the Duma—the

monarchy avoided outright revolution. The new limited constitutional monarchy lasted only a decade, however, as the Bolsheviks and Vladimir Lenin took power in 1917.

Critical Overview

"Errand" has been widely praised by critics since its initial publication. It has not only won its share of prizes and been anthologized numerous times, but the volume in which it appears, *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories,* received a National Book Critics Circle Award nomination in fiction and a Pulitzer Prize nomination for fiction. Writing in the introduction to *The Best American Stories, 1988,* Mark Helprin calls the story "a cold and brilliant imagining of the death of Chekhov." Mark Facknitz described it in similar terms, writing that "Errand" is a "biographical fantasy on the death of Anton Chekhov." Ewing Campbell, author of *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction* discusses the story in terms of Carver's technique, claiming that it is "written in the articulate idiom of the historian with complete sentences, elevated diction, scholarly coherence, and omniscient authority." Campbell also praises the story for its "cinematic possibilities" and states that it is "truly exceptional."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition and writes regularly on American literature and culture. In this essay, he explores how Carver's short story relates to the concepts of originality and literature.

A realist who shunned wordplay and the cerebral antics of fiction writers such as Donald Barthelme and John Barth and who claimed that he sought emotional truth in his writing, Carver seems an unlikely candidate to have written a story that could so easily be considered postmodern, but "Errand" is precisely that. For like so much postmodern art and literature, it questions the very idea of originality upon which modern western notions of art and literature are based by questioning its own authority. Carver says that he wrote the story as homage to Chekhov, a way of honoring someone whose own writing has meant so much to him. Precisely how it honors Chekhov, however, isn't clear. For on the surface, it seems to merely recapitulate the details of Chekhov's dying, as Henri Troyat had so ably done in his biography. In many places, Carver's story takes entire sentences from Troyat's account. If Carver had not written about the story in a separate essay and was not an already established writer, it's conceivable that he could be accused of plagiarizing Troyat.

Plagiarism, however, at least in the sense of self-consciously borrowing from other texts has, in the late twentieth century, become a virtue in art and literature, rather than a mark of inferiority. Appropriating other writer's words or ideas to make something "new," critics often see as a mark of genius and, ironically, originality. Writers such as Kathy Acker, John Ashbery, Donald Barthelme, and William Burroughs have built their careers by reshaping (sometimes minimally) what others have written.

Praising a writer's originality is, of course, a staple on book covers and in literary criticism. Such praise is meant to distinguish a writer's work from others, to say that it does not imitate another piece of writing. As applied to art and literature, the sense of the word "originality" to mean the quality of being wholly new and the work of one person has been in use since the late seventeenth century. Prior to that the word had, according to Raymond Williams, "a static sense, of some point in time or some force or person from which subsequent things and conditions have arisen." The use of the word evolved at the same time that changes in notions of what it meant to be an individual were changing. Originality became linked with ideas of authenticity, singularity, genius, and modern ideas of literature itself and became a way to distinguish what was good and pleasing in art and writing.

The extent of Carver's borrowing is extraordinary. Adopting the tone and style of a historian, Carver repeats the facts that Troyat had laid out regarding Chekhov's last days. The names, places, and for the most part, the incidents are all the same. Carver even uses some of the same quotations as Troyat, drawing from Chekhov's sister's diary and Chekhov's own letters. This sentence is from Troyat, describing where Chekhov went to convalesce: "Badenweiler is a spa on the western edge of the Black Forest, not far from Basel." This is what Carver writes: "Badenweiler is a spa and resort

city in the western area of the Black Forest, not far from Basel." When Chekhov dies, Troyat writes, "A large black-winged moth had flown in through the window and was banging wildly against the lamp." Carver writes: "A large, black-winged moth flew through a window and banged wildly against the electric lamp." There are other similar duplications. If a student wrote the sentences Carver used in his story as part of a composition assignment, she might very well be flunked for plagiarizing. Carver, however, brings the authority of his reputation, of already having established himself as a writer of originality. His own use of Troyat's words are read as a mark of genius, part of his ability to remake something into his own. Critics writing about the story emphasize this idea repeatedly. William Abrahams, for example, in the introduction to *Prize Stories 1988: The O. Henry Awards,* in which "Errand" appears, states "The biographical details around which the story has been composed will be found in any biography. But almost at once Carver strikes a note of his *own* [italics mine]." Another critic, Martin Scofield, writes, ""Errand" is a fresh and striking achievement, part of which is a further development of the preoccupation with historical and fictional truth." This preoccupation with truth defines Carver's writing throughout his career.

Carver claims that the story was difficult to write, "given the factual basis of the material." In his essay "On Errand," he writes,

I couldn't stray from what had happened, nor did I want to. As much as anything, I needed to figure out how to breathe life into actions that were merely suggested or not given moment in the biographical telling.

Carver does this primarily through "fleshing out" facts provided by Troyat and by creating the character of the bellboy who brings the champagne and who functions as the audience for Olga Knipper' s fantasy at the end of the story. But do these changes make an essay into a piece of short fiction, which is how "Errand" has been packaged and sold?

Carver's changes certainly dramatize Troyat's account, which, for a biography, is already well dramatized. Though Troyat never enters the mind of his characters and imagines what they might be thinking (as Carver does with Knipper), he does make choices as to which details to include and which to leave out in his account of Chekhov's death. His description of the weather the day Chekhov dies, the detail of the moth flying into the lamp, and the way in which he cobbles together quotations from various characters all make for very literary reading, very imaginative reading, as these tactics imply much by what they do not say. Perhaps Carver's story, rather than being a different kind of writing than history—one marked by imagination, and by incidents that have no factual basis—is the same kind of writing but distinguished, rather, by its *degree* of imagination. It is closer to a historical essay than it is to fiction because it does not attempt to alter the emotional truth of Chekhov's death; it merely amplifies it. Scofield underscores the composing strategies historians and fiction writers hold in common when he writes, "The activity of the short-story writer and the historian are in many ways very similar: The historian also has to judge the pace of his narrative, to balance major events against details, to phrase the narrative to achieve drama and mood as well as factual accuracy."

The mood achieved by Carver's story doesn't change the truth of the facts; rather, it heightens them. For example, when Chekhov's death is imminent, Troyat writes: "Dr. Schwöhrer sent for a bottle of champagne." Carver, however, imbues this action with historical detail, allowing readers to see the action rather than just being told about it. Carver writes that Schwöhrer

read the instructions for using the device. If he activated it by holding his finger on a button and turning a handle on the side of the phone, he could reach the lower regions of the hotel—the kitchen. He picked up the receiver, held it to his ear, and did as the instructions told him.

These details place readers at the scene in 1904. They can visualize the doctor's tension, his haste, and by doing so they can participate in it. By viscerally appealing to his readers' sense of urgency, Carver has gotten at the internal truth of the moment. Historical detail, however, while helping to dramatize the situation, does not sentimentalize it. Even the scene Carver most changes from the original, where the bellboy returns and Knipper, trancelike, tells him how to fetch a mortician, though skirting on sentimentality, nonetheless avoids it, as Carver returns the reader's attention to the prosaic image of the bellboy picking up the cork.

By dramatizing facts, Carver creates a different kind of reader, one who can empathize with Knipper and Chekhov's suffering, rather than just comprehend it. Carver's "originality" comes not only from the ways in which he has reworked the words of another writer but also from how he has reworked the experience of readers. It is in this manner that Carver makes a tribute out of "fictionalizing" Troyat's biography.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Errand," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Walker teaches courses in poetry and fiction at the University of Washington. In the following essay, he considers Carver's short story as a stylistic tribute to Chekhov.

"An artist observes, selects, guesses, and synthesizes." So wrote Anton Chekhov in an 1888 letter to his friend and publisher, A. S. Suvorin. Chekhov's description of the artistic process has proved persuasive to many of his literary heirs, the most important of these in recent years has been Raymond Carver. "Errand," the last story Carver published before his untimely death in 1988, serves not only as a tribute to the beloved Russian writer but also as a nod to his artistic principles.

"I thought I saw an opportunity to pay homage— if I could bring it off, do it rightly and honorably—to Chekhov, the writer who has meant so much to me for such a long time," Carver wrote in a contributor's note to *The Best American Short Stories 1988. A* photograph of Chekhov, bundled up in a wool overcoat and cradling a black dog, hung in Carver's study for years; a three-by-five index card with a line from Chekhov ("and suddenly everything became clear to him") sat on his desk. But the spark for "Errand" proved to be Henri Troyat' s biography, *Chekhov,* from which Carver gleaned many of the details he needed to recreate the writer's last days. The processes of observation and selection had begun.

T. S. Eliot, in one of his bolder moments, wrote, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal." Mature fiction writers also steal—taking only the large bills they need, leaving behind the scattered singles and coins. Many of the quotes in "Errand"—from Olga Knipper and from Chekhov himself—come directly from Troyat's biography, and even some passages of simple information are strikingly close to the source (Carver: "Badenweiler is a spa and resort city in the western area of the Black Forest, not far from Basel;" Troyat: "Badenweiler is a spa on the western edge of the Black Forest not far from Basel"). But Carver's larceny is in the service of a greater good. By establishing a tone of detached authority—a biographer's tone rather than a fiction writer's—Carver blurs the line between what's real and what's not and sets the reader up for that final fictional flight.

However, Carver's touches are evident from the start. "Chekhov," the story begins: it's both an announcement of the subject and a glimpse of Carver's famed minimalist style (a style that's elsewhere little on display). Chekhov is said to appear "very much as he looks in the photographs taken of him during this period"—a claim the biographer can't be sure of but the fiction writer can readily make. Moscow is littered with "frozen heaps of snow," and again the fiction writer appears, infusing the landscape with haphazard menace. (Chekhov himself would appreciate the brevity of the scene. In a letter to his older brother, he writes, "I think descriptions of nature should be very short and always be *à propos.*") The name of the champagne (Moet) and Chekhov's room number (211) bear the mark of imaginative reconstruction. Even a small pairing like "little turkey" and "my joy"—two of Chekhov's endearments for his wife—demonstrates Carver's art. The quirkiness of the first address allows for the sentimentality of the second.

In a letter to his wife, Chekhov writes, "You ask me what life is. That's like asking what a carrot is. A carrot is a carrot, and there's nothing more to know." Carver adopts this position throughout much of "Errand," eschewing abstractions and building his story out of carefully selected concrete details.

The cocoa, oatmeal, and strawberry tea; the large, black-winged moth; the cork popping out of the champagne bottle: these details are all found in Troyat' s biography, and Carver recognizes them as markers (not symbols) in a properly material world. (Chekhov didn't believe in anything, Carver writes, "that couldn' t be apprehended by one or more of his five senses.") The story abounds in sensory moments: readers see a sketch of Chekhov's lungs, hear ratchety breathing, smell formaldehyde, taste champagne, feel hands being wiped on a towel. Tolstoy's coat is made of bearskin; the three roses are yellow; the towel is dark. It's through such details, through such close observation, that readers accurately communicate their versions of the world to one another. In his essay "All My Relations," Carver writes, "I believe in the efficacy of the concrete word, be it noun or verb." Concrete words lead to concrete images, which lead to concrete perceptions.

Leaving observation and selection behind, readers move onto guesswork. In his contributor's note to *The Best American Short Stories 1988,* Carver writes,

"I needed to figure out how to breathe life into actions that were merely suggested or not given moment in the biographical telling. And, finally, I saw that I needed to set my imagination free and simply invent."

Two characters in "Errand," the mortician and the waiter, don't appear in the biographical account. (It's worth noting that the story was titled, in draft, "The Mortician.") And yet the waiter dominates the final scene—the scene that begins with the call of the thrushes and the return of "everyday sounds." The waiter has been glimpsed earlier, moving amongst Dr. Schwöhrer and the other historical personages. Carver has described him in authoritative detail ("The trousers of his uniform were wrinkled, the creases gone, and in his haste he'd missed a loop while buttoning his jacket"), but it is only in the final scene that the young man ("nearly a grown-up now") springs fully to life. Chekhov once wrote that moonlight is best shown reflected from a broken bottle. Carver's strategy is similar: he shifts the focus from the dead Chekhov to the living waiter, without letting readers forget what lies just offstage. In *Raymond Carver: An Oral Biography,* writer Richard Ford says, "Ray's stories are often about third parties, people looking out windows, glimpsing what seems to be real life in progress." The waiter is the classic third party—he doesn't even have a name—and yet he provides a necessary human perspective on this tale of "beauty, peace, and the grandeur of death." Carver has spoken, in interviews, about a "submerged population" that often appears in Chekhov's work. It's a point of kinship between the two authors; Carver's fictional characters are often deeply submerged themselves. How wonderful, then, that in his final story, Carver allows one of these characters to come up for air— to get, if not the last word, then at least the last action.

And it's in that final action, the scooping up of the fallen cork, that a degree of synthesis is achieved. In the introduction to Carver's poetry collection *A New Path to the Waterfall,* Tess Gallagher writes, "It is the ordinary moment which illuminates the most extraordinary things." The retrieval of the cork is an ordinary moment, but it's done with consummate grace (remember: the waiter performs the task without looking down and with a porcelain vase in his other hand). The young man proves himself capable of the errand he's about to undertake; he's an artist now, adding a tiny bit of order to the world. Olga has already said she requires a "mortician, in short, worthy of a great artist," and now she has an errand boy who's equally worthy. He'll be able to "walk briskly, comporting himself at all times in as dignified a manner as possible." He won't be "frightened or repelled."

The significance of these small actions becomes clear when readers loop back to Chekhov's comments about life and writing. "I'll just have to limit myself," he says, "to the description of how my heroes love, marry, give birth, die, and how they speak." That word "limit" is meant as a joke, and it's a joke that Carver is in on. To describe how humans get along in the world is a limitless assignment, but the place to start is with small gestures, be they familial, professional, or artistic. The waiter has placed himself inside of the human network; he's shown himself to be an artist and an ally. He's careful (as in full of care). As Carver writes in "All My Relations," *"Abjure carelessness in writing,* just as you would in life."

One point of synthesis remains to be noted. While Carver was fashioning his tale about the death of Chekhov, the man the British press would soon elegize as "the American Chekhov" was dying himself. Carver suffered pulmonary hemorrhages in September of 1987; a month later doctors removed two-thirds of his cancerous left lung. Brain cancer followed; Carver died in August of 1988. In "Errand," Carver describes a fading Chekhov telling his sister Maria "that he was 'getting fat' and felt much better now that he was in Badenweiler." He tells his mother that he'll be cured in a week. He reads railway timetables; he asks for sailing schedules. "What could he have been thinking?" Carver asks.

Shortly before his death in 1988, around the time of Carver's fiftieth birthday, the man who once described himself as a body attached to a cigarette tells the *New York Times,* "I'm going to make it. I've got fish to catch and stories and poems to write."

Source: Cody Walker, Critical Essay on "Errand," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Campbell analyzes how "Errand" both departs from and retains elements of Carver's other fiction.

"Errand" bears witness to what can be achieved when one follows Paul Valéry's example of "The Method of Leonardo." He asserts in his essay on da Vinci that "very little . . . I shall have to say of [Leonardo da Vinci] should be applied to the man who made this name illustrious":

An author who *composes* a biography can try to *live* his subject or else to *construct* him, and there is a decided opposition between these two courses. *To live him* is to transform oneself into what is necessarily incomplete, since life in this sense is composed of anecdotes, details, moments. *Construction,* on the other hand, implies the *a priori* conditions of an existence that could be *completely different.*

This sort of logic is what leads by way of sensory impressions to the construction of what I have just called a *universe.*

What Carver constructs by way of sensory impressions in "Errand" is an imaginary universe that is all his own, a *world* like the one he attributed to Barthelme. Refusing to find the major factors of a life in the usual documentation, his biography becomes a fiction.

Although this development can be demonstrated by analysis and explication and by citing expert testimony, the radical nature of it is more forcefully illustrated by Mark Helprin, who chose the stories for *The Best American Stories, 1988.* In his introduction, Helprin explains that "the stories in this volume have been judged blindly. Shannon Ravenel graciously blacked out the names of the authors, and my wife went even further and blacked out the names of the publications. Of course we could not have obliterated characteristic graphics, styles, and voices, but I confess that the voices were not familiar to me and that therefore no one was afforded advantage or suffered disadvantage."

The method works to Helprin's satisfaction. Upon learning he has selected stories by individuals whose work he usually finds intolerable, he is pleasantly shocked, a revelation that might leave readers bemused were it not for an unambiguous and passionate detailing of his biases with regard to literature. He loves literature that is "pleasingly beautiful" and "deeply consequential." He reports that he does not like minimalist fiction littered with brand names and people in ill health, who watch television and are addicted to tobacco, alcohol, and coffee. Nor does he like characters without professions or trades.

The items on this list, he informs the reader, are the "useless touchstones of American fiction," an attitude Chekhov anticipated when he created Burkin and Alehin, who "felt inclined, for some reason, to talk about elegant people" and were not satisfied with the

dreary story of a clerk who ate gooseberries. The items are also touchstones of the fiction on which Raymond Carver built his early reputation.

Nevertheless, Helprin selected Carver's "Errand" despite tuberculosis, waiters, brand names (Moët), insomnia, and the use of tobacco, coffee, and alcohol. Although this lapse may be a consequence of Helprin's kinder attitude toward waiters attending well-fed bankers and rosy-cheeked tourists among the jars of caviar and bottles of champagne at a fashionable watering place, it is more likely explained by Carver's radical departure from his earlier fiction.

For in "Errand," both form and content have been altered. Characteristic signatures of plain diction and disrupted syntax, those recognizable markers of Carver's voice, are absent, replaced by the language of the traditional historian: "Waiters came and went ceaselessly"; "impressed with the solicitude shown"; "without conferring"; "so entirely appropriate it seems inevitable." Having adopted the historian's voice, Carver maintains it to the end. This is the language we expect from characters who frequent exclusive resorts, and Badenweiler in the western area of the Black Forest, with the Vosges in sight, is a long way from Hopelessville and blue-collar despair.

And yet, other characteristic markers are present. The story focuses on one of Carver's earliest and most persistent themes: the imaginative leap occurring in the mind of one character, its absence in another, both of whom are present at the same time and place. We may recall the narrator of "Fat" and her friend Rita, as an example.

Helprin characterizes the story as a "cold and brilliant imagining of the death of Chekhov," and Facknitz calls it a "biographical fantasy on the death of Anton Chekhov." They mean the author's imaginative realization, but the imagination is at once shaper, subject, and product, exemplifying that old triptych of signifier, signified, and signification.

The story opens on the night of 22 March 1897 and a dinner for Chekhov and his friend Alexei Suvorin at the Heritage. The trappings are posh, but the 10-course meal, including wines, liqueurs, coffee, is interrupted when Chekhov begins to hemorrhage. Chekhov's illness is introduced in a page, followed by a summarizing transition that carries the reader to 1904 and Badenweiler, a German spa. Relying on passages from Suvorin's diary, Maria Chekhov's *Memoirs,* Tolstoy's journal, Chekhov's own writings, and especially Henri Troyat's biography of Chekhov, Carver provides hospital impressions, the extent of Chekhov's illness, and the fact of Chekhov's marriage to Olga Knipper, a distinguished actress.

Except for the initial word of the story— "Chekhov," which stands alone—"Errand" is written in the articulate idiom of the historian with complete sentences, elevated diction, scholarly coherence, and omniscient authority. It moves forward over a span of time, space, and action to the crucial night of Chekhov's death, and here Carver's fictive touch becomes visible. All that has gone before is necessary exposition, which establishes the historian's voice, but without negating the work's fictionality.

In his introduction to *Prize Stories 1988: The O. Henry Awards,* William Abrahams discusses "Errand" as the first prize story and deals quickly with the notion that real people cannot appear in fiction: "The biographical details around which the story has been composed will be found in any biography. But almost at once Carver strikes a note of his own." That last statement reminds us that *fiction* derives from *fingere,* the Latin verb for the act of *shaping,* and that striking one's own note is the defining activity.

Both Carver and Troy at freely move the focus from one individual to another. On the night of the great man's death, Olga sends a young Russian for the doctor. Her memory of the event was striking enough for Troyat to cite it: "I can still hear the sound of the gravel under his shoes in the silence of that stifling July night" and for Carver to reproduce it in his story. The image evoked by this historical errand could well be the source of Carver's imaginary errand. In any case, the errand brings the doctor, who injects camphor into Chekhov, but without effect.

It is at this point in the narrative that Carver's dramatic powers begin to draw apart from the biographer's traditional task. Where Troyat writes, "So Dr. Schwöhrer sent for a bottle of champagne," Carver creates a scene and brings it to life with details and dialogue. He invents the expression on the doctor's face, goes into his mind, details the attempt to call down to the kitchen and the conversation. Inspired, he fashions the young man who, roused from his sleep, brings the champagne, going into the detail of the brand name and room number.

The three principal characters take a glass of Moël. Chekhov says it has been a long time since he has tasted champagne. He drinks, turns on his side, and stops breathing. Out of habit, the doctor has pushed the cork back into the bottle. Now he draws a watch, taking Chekhov's wrist, and holds it as the second hand circles the watch face three times. At this moment a black moth flies into the room, striking the lamp, and the doctor releases the wrist, saying, "It's over." As the doctor leaves Olga with her dead husband, the cork pops from the champagne bottle, and foam spills over.

These details—the second hand turning, the memento mori of the black moth flying into the room, the doctor snapping the watch cover down, the cork popping out, and the foam spilling over— are rendered as cinematic images, creating moments of pronounced objective narrative as if only the camera is involved. It is a rare emphasizing of the literary text's cinematic possibilities.

With Chekhov dead, the focus shifts from him to his wife. Olga stays with the deceased until morning when the young man who brought the champagne returns with roses. He wants to retrieve the silver bucket and clear away the glasses. He also wants to announce that breakfast will be served in the garden. Standing there with the roses in his hand, unaware of what has occurred, he sees the cork on the floor.

Suddenly Olga informs him that she needs him to go for the mortician, and here, the omniscient narrator and Olga merge. In a fantasy of the young man's errand, she projects her vision into her instructions, description of what he can expect, and reassurances. One of the great Russian writers has died. His death and embalming

must be attended to with the greatest discretion. This is the most important thing ever to happen to the young man, but he is unaware of it. His great concern is for the cork lying at his feet and how to retrieve it while holding a vase of yellow roses.

With unanticipated symmetry, the theme of Carver's last story—the imaginative leap—rejoins that of "Fat," the initial fiction of his first collection, *Will You Pleas Be Quite, Please?* We should recall that in "Fat," the narrator-waitress attempts to communicate the extraordinary effect of her encounter with an obese customer by telling her friend about the experience. Unfortunately, the shared event is interpreted in diametric fashion by the two principals—the one heightened by imagination, the other locked on the trivial—so that the event is both significant and trivial without contradiction since it depends on opposed interpretations.

The juxtaposed antithetical attitudes, also repeated in "Sacks," occur in "Errand" with the uncanny effect of a third-person omniscience that narrows the distance between author and character, making it difficult to differentiate between the two. This ambiguity makes Madame Chekhov, not the waiter, the central figure. Her attitude (and the author's), influenced by Chekhov's death, reflects the magnitude of the errand. She, the author, and the reader invest the errand with its special coloring because of her, the author's, and the reader's respective relations with the great man and consequent emotional states.

Never having loved the man or read his work, unaware of the details and consequently the significance, Carver's young waiter is concerned only about the cork at his feet. Although his errand— imagined by Olga or the implied author or both— places the attention on him, it is the act of imagining that has always occupied the central position for Carver. Marilynne Robinson notes this characteristic of Carver's work in her review of *Where I'm Calling From:* "Nothing recurs so powerfully in these stories as the imagination of another life, always so like the narrator's or the protagonist's own that the imagination of it is an experience of the self." She might have added that the imagination of another's life is also a characterizing element: "He was nearly grown-up now and shouldn't be frightened or repelled by any of this." Such a thought directs the angle of vision from Madame Chekhov to the waiter. As a projection of her values, it removes any chance that the image of the young man's errand is his fantasy. "Nearly grown-up" would not fit the self-image of a young man in such a place.

With the passage of time, Carver's stories will sort themselves out, some rising to the top and remaining there, some settling at lower positions on the critical scale. The controversy over minimalism will continue. We can count on that because it lacks the elements for broad appeal. There will also be disagreement about "A Small, Good Thing" because of its sentimentality, although most critics have deflected that criticism. Certainly, that feature and the story's theme of redemption have made it more attractive than "The Bath" with its theme of menace for most readers. Over the transitional stories—"Cathedral," "Blackbird Pie," "Errand"—there should be less contention because, measured against all the fiction Carver wrote, they are truly exceptional, possessing the promise of greater work to come.

Anything but depleted, Carver was fashioning a new world of fiction when he died, bringing to it a freshness that might have redefined "the Carveresque" had he lived longer and continued in the direction he was going. "Cathedral" took a sharp turn away from despair and did so without compromising the hard edge of Carver's earlier work. "Blackbird Pie" dared to go beyond realism. "Errand" was a loving tribute to the writer who traced secure, intact paths for Raymond Carver to follow. He followed them until it was time to break new ground and trace paths of his own, and along those new paths there were markers, possessing a special merit, that identified the course as exclusively Carver's.

Source: Ewing Campbell, "Mastery and Continued Growth: 'Where I'm Calling From,'" in *Raymond Carver: A Study of Short Fiction,* Twayne, 2001, pp. 81-86.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Meyer presents an overview of "Errand."

"Errand," one of the crowning jewels in Carver's oeuvre, is unlike any other story he wrote, with the possible exception of "The Train." Just as that story borrowed from a separate text, John Cheever' s "The Five-Forty-Eight," so does "Errand" work from the facts presented in another text: the story of the death of Anton Chekhov. There is a certain amount of factual material to be established at the outset of the story, and Carver presents it straightforwardly. He explains that, in the middle of the night, during a heat wave at the spa at Badenweiler, Chekhov finally succumbed to the tuberculosis that had been slowly killing him. The only people with him were his wife, the actress Olga Knipper, and his doctor, Dr. Schwohrer. Immediately prior to Chekhov's death, however, Schwohrer had ordered champagne for the three of them to raise a last toast. During the remainder of "Errand," Carver focuses our attention on the unsuspecting hotel delivery boy who fills this drink order. In a way, Carver prepares us for this unlikely focus in his explanation of the departure of Dr. Schwohrer following Chekhov's death. He writes that the doctor "picked up his bag and left the room and, for that matter, history." Schwohrer has played a significant role in the story—it was his idea, after all, to order the champagne—but we know nothing of his life outside of his encounter with the dying Chekhov. What, then, can be the importance of a person who didn't even play a significant role in this encounter, namely, the delivery boy? Carver imagines this character's position, returning to his old theme of putting oneself in another's shoes, and comes to view the events from a completely different perspective.

Carver projects that the bellhop had probably "been resting (slumped in a chair, say, dozing a little), when off in the distance the phone had clamored in the early-morning hours—great God in Heaven!—and the next thing he knew he was being shaken awake by a superior and told to deliver a bottle of Möet to Room 211." Naturally the boy is confused, and after he drops off the champagne Schwohrer quickly hustles him out of the room. Later on that morning, however, before the first official has gone to see about the situation in Room 211, the delivery boy, now fully awake and looking much more professional, returns to collect the bottle and glasses, and to present Olga with some flowers. He is made uneasy by Olga's distracted behavior, though, and he doesn't quite know what to do with the flowers. He senses that something is odd in the room, but he doesn't quite understand what has happened; there is no outward disturbance except for the cork from the champagne bottle which rests by the woman's foot, yet he is sure that something has gone wrong. Olga then charges him with an errand: to find, quietly and unobtrusively, the city's best mortician and to bring him to Chekhov's room. Olga emphasizes that he is to proceed slowly and methodically so as not to raise alarm about the great man's death. The bellhop nods his head, although he clearly hasn't grasped the significance of what is taking place. Instead, Carver notes, "at that moment the young man was thinking of the cork still resting near the toe of his shoe. To retrieve it he would have to bend over, still gripping the vase. He would do this. He leaned over. Without looking down, he reached out and closed it into his hand." White some critics see this action as showing the boy's total misapprehension of the difference between

the trivial and the serious, there's more to it than that. The language of the passage has a remarkably upbeat tone to it, and the zen-like action indicates that a kind of grace has settled on the delivery boy. Carver indicates that if the boy can accomplish his errand, he will in fact have become significant to the story. Although in actuality history was not kind to the young man, for his "name hasn't survived, and it's likely he perished in the Great War," through his role in "Errand" he has indeed become an important figure, for in paying homage to Chekhov, Carver is paying homage to this anonymous bellhop as well. Thus, as Graham Clarke has written, "Errand" is "centrally Carver, for the waiter, like the figures in Carver's American stories, has been made visible: photographed, so to speak, as a singular being within a life as distinctive as the other characters in the story." As much as Carver admired Chekhov, he also acknowledges that this anonymous delivery boy's life was equally important.

Another Carver tradition that "Errand" continued was the winning of awards; the story received the first prize in the 1988 O. Henry Awards and was included in *The Best American Short Stories, 1988.* The latter distinction is particularly interesting, since Mark Helprin, the guest editor for that year's volume, made his choices without knowing the various texts' authors, and included Carver's story despite spending the majority of his introduction railing against minimalism. By the time Carver wrote his final stories, he had obviously moved beyond the limiting style of extreme minimalism. Ewing Campbell, for example, writes that "the expressionism of 'Blackbird Pie' and imagine history of 'Errand' . . . signal a striking departure from the old, for which very little in Carver's realistic fiction could have prepared us." Mark A. R. Facknitz concurs, stating that these two texts "seem to mark a new and more sophisticated tendency in Carver's work." As a matter of fact, none of Carver's final seven stories would be fully at home in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love,* the text that defined the minimalist movement and gave Carvers career a major boost. Although many readers still associate him with the stories in that volume, it is in fact his least representative work, since the stories he produced both before and after that collection are markedly different.

Source: Adam Meyer, "Raymond Carver: 'Errand,'" in *Raymond Carver,* Twayne's United States Authors Series, G. K. Hall & Co., 1995.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay excerpt, May explains how Carver shows "that complex human meaning can be communicated by the simplest of gestures and the most trivial of objects."

Realism in the modern short story from Chekhov to Carver creates metaphorically meaningful reality by focusing on metonymic detail in a highly compressed, highly patterned form. In "Errand," one of the last stories published before his untimely death from cancer, Raymond Carver epitomizes this central short-story characteristic while at the same time paying tribute to his master Chekhov. Like a Chekhov story, "Errand" seems, for the most part, less a unified narrative than a straightforward report of Chekhov's death in a hotel in the resort city of Badenweiler, Switzerland. The story recounts without comment Chekhov's last hours as a doctor visits him in his room and as his wife Olga Knipper stands by helplessly. Knowing that it is hopeless and that it is only a matter of minutes before Chekhov's death, the doctor orders champagne and three glasses from the kitchen. A few minutes after taking a drink Chekhov dies.

Carver has said that he was prompted to write the story while reading Henri Troyat' s biography of Chekhov. He was particularly struck by the doctor in attendance ordering the bottle of champagne, and he began by considering such ordinary metonymic details as how the doctor went about ordering it, how it was delivered, and what the protocol was when it arrived. Carver said he was seriously interested in what he was doing, but he was not sure what he was doing; it was just "an opportunity to pay homage—if I could bring it off, do it rightly and honorably—to Chekhov, the writer who has meant so much to me for such a long time" [. . .]

What makes "Errand" a story rather than a historical account is the return of the young waiter who brings the champagne. When the young man comes to the room the next morning to bring a vase of roses and to pick up the champagne bottle and glasses, Olga, who has spent the remainder of the night sitting alone with Chekhov's body, urges him to go into the town and find a mortician, someone who takes great pains in his work and whose manner is appropriately reserved. The young man listens as Olga tells him in great detail what to do. Meanwhile, the boy is thinking of something else; on the previous night, just after Chekhov died, the cork which the doctor had pushed back into the champagne bottle popped out again and now lies just at the toe of the boy's shoe. He wants to bend over and pick it up but does not want to intrude by calling attention to himself. When Olga finishes the story-like description of the errand she wishes the boy to perform, he leans over, still holding the vase of roses, and without looking reaches down and closes the cork into his hand.

It is this single, simple detail that makes "Errand" a fitting tribute to the short-story writing art of both Chekhov and Carver. The cork is a concrete object in the world that the reader can almost tangibly feel as the boy closes his hand around it. However, it is the concrete act of picking up the cork that humanizes an otherwise abstract report of Chekhov's death and ironically makes it alive. It is a purely objective description that

resonates with powerful subjective feelings. It means nothing, but it means a great deal. It means that in the presence of death, living acts continue. It means that with the end, nothing must be left lying around. It means that although Chekhov is dead, the essence of his art remains. It embodies the most important lesson that Carver learned from Chekhov: that the smallest human act has dignity and that complex human meaning can be communicated by the simplest of gestures and the most trivial of objects.

Source: Charles E. May, "Reality in the Modern Short Story," *in Style,* Vol. 27, No. 3, Fall 1993, pp. 377-78.

Adaptations

Director Robert Altman adapted nine of Carver's stories and a prose poem for the screen in the motion picture *Short Cuts* (1993).

Random House released a cassette of Peter Riegert reading stories from Carver's collection *Where I'm Calling From.*

Topics for Further Study

Compare Chekhov's short stories to Carver's, especially those included in Carver's collection *Where I'm Calling From.* Write an essay exploring the similarities in style and subject matter between Chekhov and Carver.

Compare the similarities and differences in how Carver represents Chekhov's death and how Henri Troyat represents the writer's death in his biography, *Chekhov.* What, if anything, marks Carver's account as fictional?

Carver was battling cancer at the time he wrote "Errand" and had only a short time to live. Discuss how Carver's own situation influences his choice to write a story about the death of a well-known writer like Chekhov.

Write an imaginative rendering of the circumstances surrounding your own death. What does such a story tell you about your values, desires, and beliefs?

How do you think Chekhov would have written about his own death?

Unlike many of Carver's characters, Chekhov was financially and socially successful, a man of reputation and means. He died in bed in a resort town in the German mountains, after sipping champagne. Would you consider this a "good death" ? Why or why not?

Chekhov died of tuberculosis. What would Dr. Schwöhrer have done differently if he were treating someone for the same disease today?

Compare and Contrast

1904: Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard* opens. Chekhov, age 44, dies later in the year.

2000: The popularity of Chekhov's stories and plays continues unabated. The Roundabout Theatre Company in New York City stages a successful revival of Chekhov's play, *Uncle Vanya.*

1896: The life expectancy for Russian males is only 32 years as compared with 47 years in France and the United States.

1987: The life expectancy for Russian males is almost 65 years, its greatest value on record.

2000: Drug abuse and sexually-transmitted diseases are potent new factors in declining life expectancy for Russian males, whose life expectancy has plunged to less than 59 years.

1895: Rest and diet is the most commonly prescribed treatment for tuberculosis (TB).

2000: Worldwide, TB remains a killer. Even though most strains of TB respond well to antibiotics and despite the fact that a vaccine has been available since the twenties, TB is responsible for 5 percent of all deaths worldwide and over 9 percent of adult deaths in the 15 to 59 year-old age group. The case fatality rate of TB is high; approximately 50 percent of untreated cases die of the disease.

What Do I Read Next?

Where I'm Calling From, published in 1988, is the collection of short stories in which "Errand" appears. Carver died the year it was published.

Carver was inspired to write "Errand" after reading the biography *Chekhov,* by Henri Troyat, published in 1986.

Louis Simpson's 1996 *Collected Poems* includes many pieces based on, and inspired by, Chekhov's life and writing.

Carver was a poet as well as a fiction writer. In 1989, his collection of poems *A New Path to the Waterfall* was published posthumously.

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This work, which is co-written by Carver's second wife, provides an account of Carver's life, along with insight into influences on his writing.

Gentry, Bruce, and William L. Stull, eds., *Conversations with Raymond Carver,* University Press of Mississippi, 1990.

This collection collects numerous interviews with Carver, including obscure pieces from college newspapers.

Halpert, Sam, ed., *What We Talk about When We Talk about Raymond Carver,* Gibbs Smith, 1991.

This collection of interviews with those who knew Carver best is an excellent source of biographical and critical information about Carver and his writing.

Stull, William L., and Maureen P. Carroll, *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver,* Capra, 1993.

This volume collects useful comments and anecdotes about Carver by friends, editors, and readers.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

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