A Small, Good Thing Study Guide

A Small, Good Thing by Raymond Carver

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

□A Small, Good Thing,□ an award-winning story by American short story writer and poet, Raymond Carver, was published in Carver's third major collection of stories, *Cathedral*, in 1983. In his first two collections, Carver had established himself as a new and compelling voice in American literature and a master of the short story form. In *Cathedral*, he took his craft to new levels of insight into the human condition. □A Small, Good Thing□ is generally regarded as one of Carver's finest stories, in which he goes beyond the spare narratives and unrelieved bleakness of some of his earlier work. The story is about Scotty, an eight-year-old boy who dies three days after being hit by a car as he walks to school. In language that is simple on the surface but reveals a host of telling details, Carver depicts the grief of the parents and their quarrel and final reconciliation with a baker who was baking a birthday cake for Scotty. Although tragic and disturbing, □A Small, Good Thing□ conveys a message of forgiveness, kindness, and the healing power of human community.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1938

Deathdate: 1988

Raymond Carver was born on May 25, 1938, in Clatskanie, Oregon, the son of Clevie Raymond, a laborer, and Ella Beatrice Raymond, a homemaker. In 1941, the family moved to Yakima, Washington.

Carver's father was a great storyteller and also read aloud to his son. Carver later attributed his desire to become a writer to his father. During adolescence Carver enjoyed fishing, hunting, and baseball, but his main goal was to write. He graduated from Yakima High School in 1956 and the following year married Maryann Burk, who was sixteen years old. By 1958, they had a daughter and a son and had moved to Paradise, California, where Carver entered Chico State College. At Chico, Carver studied under the novelist John Gardner.

For the next decade or so, Carver worked at a series of low-wage jobs, including gas station attendant and hospital cleaner, in order to support his family while he also continued his education. He received a degree from Humboldt State College in 1963, after which he moved to Iowa and enrolled in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. But due to lack of money he was unable to finish the two-year program. He returned to California in 1964 and lived in Sacramento, where he continued to work at odd jobs for several years. In 1967, he filed for bankruptcy and also had a drinking problem, but he was beginning to make his mark as a writer. His story □Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?□ was included in *The Best American Short Stories, 1967*. In 1968, his first book of poems, *Near Klamath*, was published, followed in 1970 by a second collection, *Winter Insomnia*.

In the early 1970s, Carver took on a series of temporary teaching positions, at the University of California at Santa Cruz, then University of California at Berkeley, and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. However, teaching seemed to exacerbate Carver's alcohol abuse, and in 1974, he was fired from the University of California at Santa Barbara for failure to meet with his classes. He filed for bankruptcy again.

In 1976, Carver's first collection of stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* , was published by McGraw-Hill to critical acclaim. However, Carver was still plagued by alcoholism and was hospitalized several times for treatment. He finally gave up alcohol in June 1977, and his life took a more positive turn. In that year, his second collection of stories, *Furious Seasons*, was published by Capra Press.

In 1981, Carver's third collection of stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, was published by Knopf. Critical praise was unanimous, and Carver was regarded

as a master of the short story genre. In 1983, another collection of stories appeared, again published by Knopf. This was *Cathedral*, which contained the story □A Small, Good Thing.□ The book was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. □A Small, Good Thing□ won an O. Henry Award and appeared in the Pushcart Prize annual.

In 1984, Carver, who had by this time divorced his first wife and was living with the poet Tess Gallagher, moved to Port Angeles, Washington. His collection of poetry, *Where Water Comes Together with Water*, was published by Random House in 1985, and another poetry collection, *Ultramarine*, appeared in 1986.

In 1987, Carver, who was a heavy smoker, was diagnosed with lung cancer. Two-thirds of his left lung was removed, but the cancer reappeared the following year. In June 1988, Carver married Tess Gallagher. He died of lung cancer on August 2 at his home in Port Washington.

Plot Summary

□A Small, Good Thing□ begins on a Saturday afternoon in an unnamed American city. Ann Weiss, a young mother, drives to the shopping center and orders a chocolate cake for her son Scotty's eighth birthday, which will be on Monday. The baker is a taciturn man, and Ann does not take to him. He promises the cake will be ready on Monday morning.

On Monday morning, Scotty is walking to school with another boy when he steps off the curb at an intersection and is knocked down by a car. The car stops but when Scotty gets to his feet and looks as if he is all right, the car leaves the scene. Scotty walks home but then collapses on the sofa and loses consciousness. He is taken to the hospital, where he is diagnosed with mild concussion and shock. He is in a deep sleep, but Dr. Francis, his doctor, says this is not a coma. Ann and her husband, Howard, wait anxiously at the bedside.

That evening, Howard returns home to bathe and change clothes. As he walks in the door, the phone rings. A voice on the other end of the line says there is a cake that was not picked up. Howard does not know what the man is talking about and hangs up. While Howard is bathing, the phone rings again, but the caller hangs up without saying a word.

Howard returns to the hospital after midnight. Scotty has still not awakened, but Dr. Francis insists there is nothing to worry about and that he will wake up soon. A nurse comes in and checks on Scotty. She tells the parents he is stable. The parents are worried but try to reassure themselves. Dr. Francis examines Scotty and again says he is all right other than a hairline fracture of the skull. He is not, according to the doctor, in a coma; his sleeping is the restorative measure the body is taking in response to shock, and he should wake up soon.

The parents try to comfort each other. Both of them have been praying. An hour later, another doctor, Dr. Parsons, enters the room and tells the parents that they want to take more x-rays of Scotty, and they also want to do a brain scan. He explains that this is normal medical procedure. Scotty is wheeled out on a gurney. His parents accompany him to the x-ray department and then return with him to his hospital room.

They wait all day, but Scotty still does not wake up. Dr. Francis continues to assure them that the boy will wake soon, but Ann and Howard become increasingly anxious. On his next visit, Dr. Francis confesses that there is no reason why Scotty has not awakened yet, but he still insists the boy is in no danger. Pressed by Ann, he admits that Scotty is in a coma, but that all the signs are good.

Ann goes home to take a bath and feed the dog. On her way out of the hospital, she cannot find the elevator and enters a small waiting room in which a black man and his wife and teenage daughter are waiting for news of their son, Franklin. The man explains

to Ann that Franklin was stabbed in a fight, even though he was not directly involved in it.

Ann returns home. At five o'clock in the morning, after she has just fed the dog, the phone rings. The man says a few words, mentioning a problem to do with Scotty, and then hangs up. Ann calls the hospital, but there has been no change in Scotty's condition. Howard thinks the caller may have been the same person who called him earlier. He wonders whether it might be the driver of the car who knocked Scotty down. Maybe the man is a psychopath and has somehow got hold of their telephone number, he suggests.

Just before seven in the morning, Ann returns to the hospital, where she inquires at a nurses' station about the condition of Franklin. A nurse informs her that Franklin died. When Ann enters Scotty's room, Howard tells her that the doctors have decided to run more tests on the boy. They are going to operate on him, since they do not know why he is not waking up. Just then Scotty opens his eyes and stares straight ahead, then at his parents. The parents are relieved and talk to him, but he does not respond. He opens his mouth and howls, then seems to relax, but stops breathing.

The doctors say that his death is caused by a hidden occlusion, and that it was a one-in-a-million chance. Dr. Francis is shaken and commiserates with Ann and Howard. He says there will be an autopsy.

At about eleven o'clock, the Weisses drive home and try to deal with their shock and grief. Ann calls her relatives; Howard goes outside to the garage, where he sits down and holds Scotty's bicycle. Then the phone rings, and it is once more the mystery caller, talking about Scotty. Ann swears at him and hangs up. She collapses over the table and weeps.

Much later, just before midnight, the phone rings. Howard answers, but the line goes dead. They both know that it is the same caller. Ann says she would like to kill him. Then she suddenly remembers the birthday cake and realizes that it has been the baker calling her to harass her for not collecting the cake.

Ann and Howard drive to the shopping center to confront the baker, even though it is about midnight. Ann knocks twice on the back door of the bakery. The baker comes to the door and recognizes Ann but says he is busy. He says he still has the three-day old cake and she can collect it if she wants to, for half-price. He repeats that he is busy and has to get back to work. Ann angrily tells him that Scotty is dead. She feels dizzy and begins to cry.

The baker's manner softens. He fetches two chairs and asks Ann and Howard to sit down. He sits down also and tells them how sorry he is about Scotty's death and sorry for his behavior, too. He asks them to forgive him. He makes them some coffee and offers them some fresh-baked cinnamon rolls. He says it is good to eat something in a time like this. Ann eats three rolls, and she and Howard listen as the baker tells them about his loneliness and what it feels like to be childless. He speaks of his repetitive,

empty work as a baker, preparing for other people's celebrations. They talk until daylight, and neither Ann nor Howard thinks about leaving.

Characters

The Baker

The baker is a somber, taciturn man with an abrupt manner. He is probably in his fifties. When Ann orders the birthday cake from him, he will not chat or be friendly with her, and his behavior makes her uncomfortable. When Ann does not collect the birthday cake, the baker makes harassing phone calls to her home. But later he asks for forgiveness, acknowledging that he was in the wrong. It transpires that he is lonely and childless. In spite of the fact that he is constantly busy as a baker, he feels his life is empty. He has forgotten whatever dreams he may once have had for his life, but he shows some kindness and compassion for Ann and Howard.

The Black Man

The middle-aged black man waits at the hospital with his wife and daughter as his son Franklin undergoes an operation.

Dr. Francis

Dr. Francis is in charge of Scotty's treatment at the hospital. He is handsome, tanned, and wears a three-piece suit. His manner is reassuring and kind.

Dr. Parsons

Dr. Parsons works in the radiology department at the hospital.

Ann Weiss

Thirty-three year old, Ann Weiss is the wife of Howard and mother of Scotty. She lives a comfortable middle-class life and is devoted to raising her young son. Grief-stricken by his death, she is aroused to fierce anger by the behavior of the baker and goes to confront him. But she calms down as the baker talks, offers her something to eat and tells her of his life.

Howard Weiss

Howard Weiss, husband of Ann and father of Scotty, is well educated, with a graduate degree in business, and is junior partner in an investment firm. He is happy with his successful life. Nothing bad has happened to him until the accident involving Scotty.

Scotty Weiss

Scotty Weiss is the son of Howard and Ann Weiss. On the morning of his eighth birthday, he is walking to school when he steps off the curb at an intersection and is hit by a car. He walks home but collapses on the sofa. In the hospital he slips into a coma. After seeming to regain consciousness for a moment, he dies.

Themes

The death of Scotty is a heart-wrenching tragedy, but out of it, from the most unlikely of sources, comes compassion, the opportunity for forgiveness, and the creation of a sense of human community in the face of the suffering that is common to all.

The situation at the beginning of the story seems perfect. A loving mother orders a birthday cake for her young son's birthday party. What could be more representative in microcosm of the joys of human community than a birthday party for a child? Then comes the tragic accident, and the precariousness of human happiness is revealed.

Before her world is shattered, Ann Weiss shows herself to be a person who likes to make connections with others; she likes to communicate and be friendly. When she first encounters the baker, she tries to engage him in conversation, but he will not be drawn out of his gruff, taciturn manner. He makes no comment at all about the child and his birthday party. As Ann thinks about him, she seems subconsciously to search for some way in which she might connect with him. She seeks the common, human element, and thinks that because he is an older man, he must have children somewhere who must have had their cakes and birthday parties: □There must be that between them, she thought.□ But she is still unable to befriend him because he insists on keeping a mental wall between them.

A similar incident occurs later in the story, when Ann is in the midst of her family crisis. She still seeks connection with others, a bridge between separate, private worlds. When she meets the parents who are waiting for news of their son, Franklin, she wants to talk more with them, since they are in a situation similar to hers: □She was afraid, and they were afraid. They had that in common.□ She wants to tell them more about the accident to Scotty, but she does not know how to begin: □She stood looking at them without saying anything more.□ Again, even though she senses the connections between very different people□the family is black, the baker is much older than she□she is unable to articulate it or get others to feel it.

The emerging dynamic of the story is therefore between community and isolation, or between distance (separation) and communication and closeness. Ann and Howard are examples of closeness; they are a loving couple who had a warm family life with their young son. The sympathetic and kind Dr. Francis is also able to share in this sense of fellowship between humans. After Scotty's death, as Dr. Francis consoles Ann, □He seemed full of some goodness she didn't understand.□

But the baker places himself outside that circle of community. He does not permit himself to reach out to others. This is clear from his interaction with Ann at the beginning, but it becomes more pronounced in the phone calls he makes to the Weisses' home. At first, he is merely unlucky. It is quite reasonable for him to call and point out that the cake has not been collected; he just happens to catch Howard at the wrong time, and Howard knows no more about a birthday cake than the baker does of Scotty's accident. It is an unfortunate incident, ripe with misunderstanding, and

demonstrates how easily in this story things can go wrong. But after this incident, the baker is more culpable. He allows his resentment that the cake has not been collected to fester, and he makes harassing calls. Unwittingly, he is completely at odds with what the situation demands; where empathy and compassion are called for, he offers only malice.

Only at the end of the story does this situation change. In the most unlikely of circumstances, the three people in the bakery manage to reach out to one another. This happens only after they reach an extreme of hostility and lack of understanding. It is the baker who makes the first move by apologizing, asking for forgiveness, and talking about his own frustrations and disappointments. They all learn that what they have in common is suffering. This is the bond that, when acknowledged, leads to compassion and understanding. The baker in his loneliness, and Ann and Howard in their grief, in the darkness of the night and the warmth of the bakery, create for themselves a renewal of the bonds of community through the simple ritual of sharing food.

Style

Setting

Other than the fact that the story appears to be set in the United States, there is a lack of specificity in the setting. The town is unnamed and could be anywhere. Also, there are few clues as to when the story takes place. It was published in 1983 but could as easily be set in 1963 or 2003. It seems to take place within a kind of bubble, without reference to anything larger than itself. The only clue comes when Ann refers to the black man and woman as Negroes, a term not much used to describe black people after the 1960s.

The lack of extraneous detail has the effect of making the stark drama and tragedy of the story stand out in sharper relief. As Carver once said in an interview with David Applefield: □My stories take place on a personal level as opposed to a larger political or social arena.□

Symbolism

There is a suggestion of religious ritual in the way that the baker breaks the dark bread and shares it with Ann and Howard at the end of the story. It recalls the Catholic ritual of the Eucharist, in which the bread offered by the priest is believed to be the body of Christ. The incident is emphasized by the descriptions of the smell and taste of the bread and the physical action of eating (□They swallowed the dark bread□). The religious symbolism adds solidity and depth to this unexpected moment of communion between the three people, in which they are able to ease their troubles by sharing them. It is perhaps no coincidence that immediately afterwards, imagery of light appears twice: □It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light,□ and the three of them stay talking until the early morning, when □the high, pale cast of light in the windows□ appears. The imagery of light suggests that even in the darkest tragedy, some hope is possible.

Historical Context

Carver's work is in the tradition of realism. When he began to publish his short stories in the 1970s, the dominant mode of literary fiction was not realism but what was sometimes called metafiction, a complex, experimental form that was as much about writing itself as about telling a story. This kind of postmodernist writing was practiced by writers such as Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut.

Carver was not attracted to this form, and he returned to the earlier literary tradition of realism, in which the writer is more interested in presenting mundane, everyday life as it is experienced by the ordinary person. However, Carver's realism was markedly different from its nineteenth-century form, in which the elements of fiction such as character and setting were described at length and in great detail.

In contrast, Carver's work is associated with the literary movement known as minimalism, which came to dominate American short story writing in the late 1970s and 1980s. The term is a problematic one and applies more to Carver's earlier stories, up to and including the collection, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (1981), than to the more filled-out stories in *Cathedral* (1983).

Minimalism is a pared down form of realism that is often distinguished more by what it leaves out than what it puts in. Novelist and short story writer, John Barth, who is known as a maximalist rather than a minimalist, described it in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1986 as □terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction□ (quoted in Randolph Paul Runyon's *Reading Raymond Carver*). In *Understanding Raymond Carver*, Arthur M. Saltzman defines minimalism as short fiction that features □flatness of narrative tone, extreme sparseness of story, an obsession with the drab and the quotidian, a general avoidance of extensive rumination on the page, and, in sum, a striking restraint in prose style.□

Minimalism has been used to describe a wide variety of writers, including, in addition to Carver, Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robison, Tobias Wolff, and others. But no writer labeled a minimalist has welcomed the term as a description of his or her work, and most writers would deny the existence of a single □minimalist school.□ Carver himself, although often regarded as a leader of the minimalists, rejected the term as applied to his work. In an interview (reprinted in *Reading Raymond Carver*), he told William L. Stull:

I'll be glad to see the appellation [minimalism] fade so that writers can be talked about as writers and not lumped together in groups where they usually don't belong. It's a label, and labels are unattractive to the people attached to the labels.

Carver also pointed out in the same interview that writers labeled as minimalists were very different from one another, a fact that tended to undermine the validity of the term.

By the late 1980s, the term minimalist was on the wane in critical discourse and there was even a backlash against it. Much of this was in reaction to writers of lesser talent than Carver who tended to imitate the form of his work without producing the same effect. Some critics argued that stories that adhered too closely to a minimalist style were deficient in terms of the range of emotions expressed and in depth of characterization.

Critical Overview

From its first publication in *Cathedral* in 1983, □A Small, Good Thing□ was recognized by reviewers and critics as one of Carver's outstanding stories. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Irving Howe compares it to the earlier version of the story entitled □The Bath.□ He feels that teachers of creative writing who consider the earlier version superior, because of its tautness, cryptic nature, and symbolism, are wrong: □The second version, though less tidy and glittering, reaches more deeply into a human situation and transforms the baker from an abstract 'evil force' into a flawed human creature.□

In the *New Republic*, Dorothy Wickenden singled out □A Small, Good Thing□ as one of the best stories in the collection. She coupled it with the story □Cathedral,□ describing them both as □astute, even complex, psychological dramas.□ But she also criticized both stories for showing signs of sentimentality, and she ventured an opinion as to why this might be:

Perhaps because he doesn't quite trust the sense of hope with which he leaves his characters, the writing at the end becomes self-consciously simple and the scenes of resolution contrived. In □A Small, Good Thing□ the stark realism of earlier scenes is replaced by rather pat symbolism about communion through suffering.

In the twenty years following its publication, □A Small, Good Thing□ continued to attract attention from critics, who see it as an example of Carver's stylistic development from the sparse minimalism of the earlier stories to what Kathleen Westfall Shute in *Hollins Critic* has called □richer, more emotionally and artistically complex□ work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth century literature. In this essay, Aubrey compares A Small, Good Thing to Carver's The Bath, an earlier version of the story.

Literary critics have often agreed that the stories in Carver's collection, *Cathedral*, are less bleak, more hopeful, than the stories he published earlier in his career. Some critics have seen in □A Small, Good Thing□ a tale of spiritual redemption. According to this view, Scotty is an innocent, suffering, Christ-like figure, and the final scene is a symbolic echo of the Last Supper in the Christian gospel. According to William Stull, in □Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver,□ this scene presents □a final vision of forgiveness and community rooted in religious faith.□ Those who read the story in this positive light sometimes suggest that Carver invests the number three with spiritual significance: Ann is thirty-three years old; Scotty dies on the third floor of the hospital, on the third day after his injury, just as Christ was crucified (possibly, according to scholars, at about the age of thirty-three), and rose from the dead on the third day. In the story, Ann and Howard Weiss both go home for brief periods to take baths, which could symbolize some kind of spiritual cleansing and rebirth (although it might also be pointed out that this would also be a perfectly natural thing to do under the circumstances).

Some readers may find these parallels with elements of the Christian tradition rather strained and point out that the universe depicted in □A Small, Good Thing□ is hardly a comforting or just one. It might best be described as random. Scotty, for example, dies in what the doctor calls a □one-in-a-million□ chance event; there is no merciful Father in heaven to save him, in spite of the fact that both his parents pray for their son's life. In the world depicted in the story, prayers are not answered, and bad things are likely to happen to anyone, even the innocent. Under the smooth surface of life, some unseen menace, some dark destiny, lurks. Howard, the father, is well aware of this possibility. After Scotty is injured, Howard reflects about his own life, which up to this point has been blessed with only good things, including a good education and a good job, a loving wife, and a son: □So far, he had kept away from any real harm, from those forces he knew existed and that could cripple or bring down a man if the luck went bad, if things suddenly turned.□ Howard thinks not in religious terms but in terms of □forces□ and □luck.□ After the tragedy occurs, the Weisses, as would be expected, do everything they can to convince themselves that Scotty will recover; after all, that is what the doctor keeps telling them. But the doctor's frequent reassurances tend to have the opposite effect; the fear of the parents increases, and the reader senses that there will be no good outcome of this sad little tale. Indeed, when Scotty does die, it is a doubly cruel event, because in the few moments before his death he appears to wake up, giving his stricken parents some false hope that is quickly dashed. In this bleak and cruel world, all people can do is reach out to one another, comfort one another, and try to endure, as the baker and the Weisses do in the end. It is hard to see in what sense this might be considered a story which culminates in an expression of □religious faith,□ since there appears to be no God and nothing in which to have faith.

Interestingly, □A Small, Good Thing□ was a revised version of □The Bath,□ a story that appeared in Carver's earlier collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). An examination of this story and the changes Carver made for the later version sheds light on Carver's developing craft and the effect he may have intended to create in □A Small, Good Thing.□

□The Bath□ is an excellent example of what is meant by minimalism. It is less than one-third of the length of □A Small, Good Thing,□ and although it has basically the same plot as the later story, the narrative is far more sparse and is stripped of all detail. Scotty does not die, but his fate remains unknown as he lies in the hospital; Ann does not have her angry confrontation with the baker, and there is no final scene of reconciliation.

In □The Bath,□ Ann Weiss is not named until late in the story. At first she is merely described as the mother, and at various other times, she is the wife and the woman. Her age is not stated. The husband, Howard in the later story, is not named at all. He is simply called the father, the man, or the husband. The details of his personal life that appear in the later story (that he is a partner in an investment firm, that his parents are alive, and his brothers and his sister are all doing well) are only very briefly mentioned in □The Bath.□ Neither of the two doctors is named either. The second doctor is presented in this way: □A doctor came in and said what his name was. This doctor was wearing loafers.□ In the later story, the doctor is given a name, Parsons, and described in a little more detail: □He had a bushy mustache. He was wearing loafers, a Western shirt, and a pair of jeans.□ In □The Bath□ the family that Ann sees in the waiting room at the hospital mentions only the name Nelson. They do not tell her, as in the later story, that Franklin, as he is now named, is their son and he was stabbed during a fight in which he was an innocent bystander. The story thus has a more impersonal quality than the later version. It is told by a narrator who seems very distant from the characters he observes, and the characters themselves display a limited range of emotions. They do not connect emotionally with others.

In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Carver explained that in □The Bath,□ he wanted to emphasize the quality of menace, and this was why the story was so compressed and condensed. Menace is conveyed, for example, in the description of the husband as he returns home to take a bath after being at Scotty's bedside for hours: □The man had been lucky and happy. But fear made him want to take a bath.□ It is as if fear is something that clings to the skin and can be washed away, or so the man mistakenly hopes. The story ends on another note of menace. Ann answers the telephone and hears the voice of the baker, although she does not know who it is: □'Scotty,' the voice said, 'It is about Scotty,' the voice said. 'It has to do with Scotty, yes.'□ The repetitions, with no further explanation given, create a menacing effect, sounding for Ann perhaps like a disembodied voice of doom for her son.

Carver liked to give his stories this quality of menace because he believed that many people feel insecure about their own lives, fearing that something could come along at any moment and destroy whatever they have.

However, after publication of □The Bath,□ Carver felt that the story needed to be □enhanced, redrawn, reimagined□ (interview with McCaffery and Gregory). He ended up revising it so thoroughly that he considered □The Bath□ and □A Small, Good Thing□ to be entirely different stories, and he said that he liked the revised story much better than the original.

What Carver did in the revision was not so much create a religious framework for the story as humanize it. The quality of menace, the sense that something bad is going to happen, remains. In one respect, this feeling has been increased, since there are now two innocent victims rather than one. In addition to Scotty, there is Franklin, who, the later story explains, was at a party minding his own business when he was attacked: □Not bothering nobody. But that don't mean nothing these days,□ says his father. A world in which minding one's own business does not spare him from the aggression of others is a menacing one indeed.

Given that Carver had no wish to remove the sense of menace that hovers over the story, almost every change and addition he made to the original story resulted in a more complex and sympathetic portrayal of human emotions. In □The Bath,□ the characters seem to live in their own small, circumscribed worlds, like orbiting planets that make no contact with each other. But in □A Small, Good Thing□ they are more willing, and often able, to reach out to others to alleviate the pain of the common human condition.

This ability to connect is apparent, for example, in Ann's greater awareness of her husband's fear and grief. After Howard tells her that he has been praying, just as she has, she reflects:

For the first time, she felt they were together in it, this trouble. She realized with a start that, until now, 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 felt glad to be his wife.

To be together, not alone, in trouble sums up the essence of □A Small, Good Thing.□ It is revealed in the climactic scene of reconciliation at the end and also in other small details that appear in the later story but not in □The Bath.□ Dr. Francis, for example, who is presented in □The Bath□ as a handsome man and a snappy dresser□a man seen from the outside only□retains those qualities but adds an inner dimension of warmth, empathy, and compassion. He embraces Ann and tries to console her, and he puts his arm around Howard's shoulders. These gestures too, are small, good things; they are the most the doctor can do in this tragic situation. Of course, these gestures, and the □small, good thing□ of eating in the company of others, are not enough, for there is nothing that can remove the grief that results from the death of a child. Nonetheless, such gestures are not in vain. They are like candles lit in the darkness, and in grief as in despair, even the tiniest ray of light can help to dispel the gloom.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on □A Small, Good Thing,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Do some Internet research on the medical condition known as coma and make a class presentation about it. What is a coma? What causes people to fall into a coma? Do people recover from comas? What treatment is given to people in a coma?

Research the role played by food and the eating of food in religious rituals. What is the connection between food and spirituality? Why do many religions have dietary laws or restrictions? What purpose do they serve? You may use examples from any religious tradition. Write an essay that describes your findings.

Write a poem based on □A Small, Good Thing.□ Try to convey the story and its theme in no more than 20-25 lines. Your poem can be in any form and told from any point of view. As an alternative, you could write the story as a song of maybe 5-6 verses. Remember that in either poem or song, you will not be able to include all the details that are found in the story. You need to pick out the most important elements and find ways of expressing them in the new form.

Read the story □The Cathedral,□ by Carver, and write a short essay comparing it to □A Small, Good Thing.□ In what ways are the two stories similar? Which story do you prefer, and why?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Carver writes mainly about people at the lower end of the socio-economic scale, and during the 1980s, the gap between the rich and the poor in the United States increases. Homelessness becomes a large social problem. It is caused by the lack of affordable housing, higher rates of joblessness, and reductions in public welfare programs that take place during the administration of President Ronald Reagan (1981-89).

Today: Homelessness remains a social problem that successive governments fail to tackle. Housing prices continue to rise, and people working in minimum-wage jobs are increasingly unable to afford them. There are no accurate national figures on the number of homeless people in the United States. However, by way of example, in Los Angeles in 2005, an estimated 85,000 people experience homelessness every day, according to the Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty at the Weingart Center, Los Angeles. In New York, an estimated 37,000 people are in shelters every night, according to the Coalition for the Homeless, New York. This figure is the highest number of homeless in New York since the Great Depression.

1980s: The plot of □A Small, Good Thing□ turns on telephone calls received by the husband and wife. In the 1980s, not everyone has answering machines, and there are no features such as Caller ID. Cordless phones first appear around 1980. However, they have limited range and poor sound quality and can easily be intercepted by another cordless phone. In 1986, the Federal Communications Commission grants cordless phones a different frequency, but there are still problems with range and sound quality.

Today: With features such as voice mail and call waiting, people have many ways of receiving telephone calls and messages. Cellular or wireless telephones are nearly as common as traditional wired telephones. Millions of people use them. They have an array of functions, enabling the user to store information, make to-do lists, keep track of appointments, send or receive email, get news and other information, and play simple games. According to a study commissioned by Motorola, cell phones are changing the way people live and work. The study finds that cell phones give people a sense of personal power. Young people in particular use cell phones to send text messages, often using what has been called □generation text,□ which incorporates abbreviations that young people all over the world recognize.

1980s: The number of deaths from motor vehicle accidents is lower than in the 1970s. The death rate falls further during the early years of the decade before rising again in every year from 1985 to 1988. In 1988, there are 48,900 deaths from motor vehicle crashes.

Today: Deaths and injuries resulting from motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for persons of every age from two through thirty-three years of age (based on 2000 data). However, traffic fatalities are falling. In 2003, the fatality rate per 100 million

vehicle miles of travel falls to a historic low of 1.48, with 42,643 people killed. Much of the decrease is attributable to increased use of seat belts and a reduction in the number of people who drive while over the legal limit for alcohol.

What Do I Read Next?

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976) was Carver's first major collection of short stories. The stories feature blue collar characters struggling to deal with problems such as alcoholism, adultery, and despair. Many of the themes that recur in Carver's later collections appear here for the first time: the failure of people to communicate with each other, how people contrive to mismanage their lives, how people survive what happens to them and come to terms with their limitations.

Carver admired the work of Bobbie Ann Mason. *Midnight Magic: Selected Stories of Bobbie Ann Mason* (1998) is a collection of seventeen stories from two previous collections by Mason, who like Carver has been labeled a minimalist by critics. Like Carver, Mason focuses on working-class life. Her characters live on the edge of poverty, often unemployed or in insecure employment, in rural and small-town Kentucky. Dubbed Kmart realism, Mason's is a world of chain stores, shopping malls, and cable television. Her characters have to deal as best they can with social changes and dislocations such as those caused by factory lay-offs and higher divorce rates.

Readers may enjoy Ann Beattie's *Park City: New and Selected Stories* (1999). Beattie made her reputation in the 1970s as a writer of minimalist short stories that were published in the *New Yorker*. Some critics see her, with Carver, as being responsible for the renaissance of the short story form in the 1970s and 1980s. This is her fifth collection of stories, although all but eight of them had been previously published in book form. Unlike the settings in stories by Carver and Mason, Beattie's terrain is the urban (usually New York), educated middle class. Her characters often seem to have no real purpose or sense of destiny; small details about their lives accumulate, but the larger meaning is up to the reader to discover, if it exists.

Tobias Wolff has sometimes been linked to Carver as a so-called minimalist, and Carver, who was generous in his praise of other writers, named Wolff as a writer he greatly admired. Wolff also admired Carver's work, and they were for a while colleagues in Syracuse University's Creative Writing Program. Wolff's collection of stories *The Night In Question: Stories* (1997) has been praised for its presentation of moral ambiguities, for it tension building, and for descriptions of how people respond to what fate brings them.

Further Study

Leypoldt, Gunter, □Raymond Carver's 'Epiphanic Moments,'□ in *Style*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Fall 2001, pp. 531-49.

Leypoldt discusses four different types of epiphanic moments in Carver's fiction: moments of sudden illumination; arrested epiphanies in which characters realize they are on the brink of a discovery but do not grasp what it is; ironized epiphanies in which the reader transcends the character's limited viewpoint; and comic epiphanies that are irrelevant to the overall plot closure.

Meyer, Adam, *Raymond Carver*, Twayne's United States Authors Series, No. 633, Twayne Publishers, 1995.

Meyer analyzes Carver's life and career and most of his fictional output. He traces the arc of Carver's artistic development, arguing that the term minimalist applies only to a portion of his work. In his analysis of □A Small, Good Thing,□ Meyer accepts the critical consensus that the work is one of the most effective of all Carver's stories.

Nesset, Kirk, *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study*, Ohio University Press, 1995, pp. 61-66.

Nesset credits □A Small, Good Thing□ with presenting a fullness and optimism unequalled in any other story by Carver. The psychological and spiritual expansion is due to the fact that the characters learn how to listen and communicate with one another.

Peden, William, *The American Short Story: Continuity and Change, 1940-1975*, 2nd edition, revised and enlarged, Houghton Mifflin, 1975.

Peden analyzes the significant trends and movements associated with the American short story in the thirty-five years up to the time immediately preceding the work of Carver. He discusses the work of the most outstanding recent short fiction writers, including John Updike, John Cheever, Donald Bartholme, Bernard Malamud, and Joyce Carol Oates.

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Shute, Kathleen WestFall, □Finding the Words: The Struggle for Salvation in the Fiction of Raymond Carver,□ in *Hollins Critic*, Vol. 24, No. 5, December 1987, pp. 1-10.

Stull, William, □Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver,□ in *Philological Quarterly*, Vol. 64, 1985, p. 11.

□□□, □Matters of Life and Death,□ in *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, edited by Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, University Press of Mississippi, 1990, p. 185, originally published in *The Bloomsbury Review*, January/February 1988.

Wickenden, Dorothy. □Old Darkness, New Light, in *New Republic*, Vol. 189, November 14, 1983, p. 38.

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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

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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