What We Talk About When We Talk About Love Study Guide

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love by Raymond Carver

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Introduction

The short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," by Raymond Carver, is the title story in his first volume of short fiction by a major publisher. Upon publication, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* received immediate and glowing critical acclaim, earning front page coverage in the *New York Times Book Review* as well as a favorable review in the *New York Review of Books.* Adam Meyer explains that "this was to be the volume that would firmly establish Carver as an important writer." The stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* are considered the epitome of Carver's sparse, minimalist writing style. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull refer to the volume as Carver's "minimalist masterpiece." Meyer explains that "the collection has been nicknamed the 'minimalist bible,' and when readers and critics consider Carver a minimalist they generally have this volume in mind." Meyer concludes that "because it is the volume that established Carver as a major literary figure, it has remained the collection most associated with him." Gentry and Stull note that "the bare-boned collection proved immensely influential on a younger generation of short-story writers coming of age in the 1980s."

The entire action of the story takes place over the course of an evening, during which two married couples, Nick, who is also the narrator, and Laura, and Mel and Terri, sit around the kitchen table drinking gin and discussing the topic of "real love." The dynamics between the two couples are contrasted through their gestures and interactions with one another. Nick and Laura are still in the glow of early love, and their behavior toward one another is affectionate and respectful. Mel and Terri, on the other hand, have been together five years, and their surface-level civility to one another barely masks a deep-seated anger and resentment. Mel's alcoholism, and increasing drunkenness over the course of the evening, sets a tone of increasingly intensified menace to the whole conversation.

This story addresses typical Carver themes of marriage and divorce, alcoholism, despair, and the difficulty of communication.

Author Biography

Raymond Carver was born on May 25, 1938, in Clatskanie, Oregon. His father was a manual laborer, and Carver worked as a laborer at various jobs from the early 1950s through the late 1960s. In 1957, at the age of eighteen, he married sixteen-year-old Maryann Burk, who eventually became a teacher, and with whom he had two children within the first two years of their marriage. They moved to California, where Carver attended Humboldt State College (now California State University at Humboldt) and received his bachelor's degree in English in 1963, while at the same time working in a sawmill to support his family. In 1966, Carver earned a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from the University of Iowa. His short story, "Will You Please Be Quiet Please?" was selected for *The Best American Short Stories of 1967,* an annual publication. His stories were selected for the O. Henry Award in 1973, 1974, 1975, and 1983. 1976 saw his first major book publication, a collection of stories written between 1962 and 1975 entitled, *Will You Please Be Quiet Please?.*

From 1971 to 1979, Carver taught at several colleges and universities, including: as a lecturer in creative writing at the University of California at Santa Cruz (1971-1972); as a lecturer in fiction writing at the University of California at Berkeley (1972-1973); as visiting professor of English at the Writers Workshop, University of Iowa (1973-1974); as a lecturer at the University of California at Santa Barbara (1974-1975); as a member of the faculty writing program at Goddard College (1977-1978); and as visiting distinguished writer at the University of Texas at El Paso (1978-1979).

Carver and Maryann separated in 1976 and he was hospitalized for his alcoholism four times between 1976 and 1977. In the summer of 1977, he quit drinking for good—one of his proudest achievements in life. His second major collection of short stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,* was published in 1981. 1983 saw the publication of his third major collection, *Cathedral.* He and Maryann divorced in 1983; in 1988, he married poet Tess Gallagher. Carver died later that year of lung cancer at the age of 50. His fourth major story collection, *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories* was published, shortly before his death. Several collections of his short stories and poems were published posthumously. Director Robert Altman adapted a number of Carver's stories to the screen, combining them into a single narrative feature film as director of the movie entitled *Short Cuts.*

Plot Summary

The action of the story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," takes place over the course of an evening, in which two couples, Nick and Laura, and Mel and Terri McGinnis, sit around the kitchen table at the McGinnis' apartment, drinking gin and talking, before they all go out to dinner together. No one so much as gets up from the table over the course of their conversation, except to get out a second bottle of gin. The story takes place in Albuquerque, New Mexico, although, as the narrator explains, "we were all from somewhere else." Mel, a forty-five year old cardiologist, is divorced, and Terri is his second wife. Terri is also divorced and Mel is her second husband. Mel and Terri have been married for four years, together for five. Nick and Laura are married, and have been together only eighteen months.

As the story opens, the narrator explains that "The gin and tonic water kept going around, and we somehow got on the subject of love." Mel, who had once gone to seminary school, claims that "real love was nothing less than spiritual love." They then begin to discuss Terri's former husband, Ed, who was physically abusive to her, had threatened Mel on several occasions, and eventually shot himself in the head, dying three days later. Mel argues that that is not real love, while Terri insists that Ed did love her. While Nick and Laura's relationship seems to be completely harmonious, and their interactions with each other kind and affectionate, Mel and Terri's interactions take on a tone of controlled menace, barely covering a deep-seated resentment between the two of them.

The conversation continues on the subject of love while Mel becomes increasingly drunk. He gives an example of what he considered to be "real love." He tells them about an elderly couple who had gotten into a terrible car accident when they were hit by a teenage boy. Both of them nearly died, but they continued to survive, although both were covered from head to toe in bandages. Mel explains that, one day, the old man explained to him in tears that he was upset that, although he and his wife's beds were next to each other in the hospital room, he could not turn his head to see her face, because of his bandages. Mel is taken with the idea that this man loved his wife so much it was nearly killing him not to be able to look at her: "I mean, it was killing the old fart just because he couldn't *look* at the . . . woman."

Mel, now clearly drunk, decides that he'd like to call and talk to his kids, who live with his ex-wife, Marjorie. He explains that Marjorie is allergic to bee stings, and part of him would like to appear at her front door and release a swarm of bees into her house. But he is baffled that he feels such hatred for her now, when he knows that he did once truly love her. Mel then decides against calling his children, and all four finish off the last of the gin. Mel erratically turns his glass of gin upside, allowing it to spill all over the table. "Gin's gone," he says. "Now what?" Terri responds. At this point the narrator ends the story with a description of the four friends, sitting in silence around the table: "I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, no one of us moving, not even when the room went dark."

Summary

"What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" is a short story of two married couples, Mel and Terri and Nick and Laura, who engage in a conversation one evening about the meaning of real love.

As the story opens, Mel is talking as Nick, from whose perspective the story takes place, provides some description of the scene in Mel's kitchen. Mel, his wife, Terri, Nick, and his wife, Laura, are seated at the kitchen table at Mel and Terri's home. The late afternoon sunlight filters into the room as the couples repeatedly pass the bottles of gin and tonic and an ice bucket.

The geographic location of the story is Albuquerque, but as Nick notes "we were all from someplace else." Mel is a cardiologist who spent five years in a seminary before going to medical school and thinks the years at the seminary were the most important years of his life for what he learned about spiritual love.

Terri states that her most dramatic encounter with love was a relationship with a man named Ed, with whom she lived before she met and fell in love with Mel. Ed used to beat Terri because he could not possess her totally. He even tried to kill her because he loved her so much.

Mel counters that abusive behavior is not love, but Terri contends that it was love albeit an atypical form. Mel is incredulous that Terri can believe that there was even a trace of true love in such a relationship, but Terri tells him that every person is different. She says that Ed loved so intensely that he was driven to the point of distraction and violence.

Eventually, Ed threatened to kill Mel for entering into Terri's life, but he soon after drank rat poison as a suicide attempt. Ed lived for a while, but his face was severely deformed from the poison, and he eventually shot himself. Mel was in the hospital when Ed was brought in. Ed lived for three more days, his head having swelled to a preposterous size. Mel comments that Ed was so inept that he couldn't even kill himself properly.

Nick takes Laura's hand in his as if to say that nothing like this strange story will ever enter their lives or their love for each other.

Terri recalls that period of her and Mel's life as being fraught with tension, and that they lived like fugitives in fear of what Ed might do to them. Terri shakes the empty gin bottle at Mel who retrieves another one from the cabinet and returns to the table.

Laura comments that she and Nick know what love is as she bumps Nick's knee under the table as if to prompt him to affirm her statement. Nick raises Laura's hand to his mouth and kisses it as a sign of his romantic love for his wife. Terri chides Nick and Laura, saying they are acting as if they are still on their honeymoon even though they have been married for a year and a half already.

The afternoon sun continues to shine into the warm kitchen, and Nick feels as if the friends at the table are enchanted as the drinks continue to flow. Mel offers up the fact that he knows what true love really is and has an example to share. Mel is distracted from his story by fixing another drink and asks out loud what any of them really know about love because everyone is really just a beginner.

Mel thought he had loved his first wife, and Terri must have loved her first husband. With those relationships completely dead, Mel wonders about where the initial love goes. Mel comments on Nick and Laura's relatively new love and how it must compare and contrast with others that they have experienced before. Mel also thinks that if something were to happen to any of the friends at the table, the partner would grieve for a while and then go out in search of another love.

Terri gently chastises Mel for being insensitive and for drinking too much, but Mel replies that since he is not on call today he feels like drinking a little. Laura tries to make Mel feel more at ease, and Mel tells Laura that if anything ever happened to his wife and her husband, he would come after her because she is so sweet.

The gin bottle passes around the table again as Mel begins his story about the example of true love he witnessed not too long ago. Mel had been on call one night and the phone rang just as he and Terri sat down to dinner. The hospital emergency room reported an auto accident where a teenager's car hit the car of an elderly couple. When Mel arrived at the hospital, the teenager had died and the elderly couple is barely clinging to life.

After many hours of surgery, the elderly people live, though they have multiple injuries. The woman is in more serious condition than her husband. The couple is moved to the Intensive Care Unit and ultimately to regular rooms. Mel stops his story and encourages the others at the table to have another drink and then they can all go to dinner at a new restaurant that he and Terri have wanted to try.

Mel continues to say that he would have liked to be a chef and if he had been born in medieval times, he would have loved to be a knight so he could have worn all that armor. Nick informs Mel of the inherent dangers of simply wearing all that metal armor, so it's probably for the best that Mel is a cardiologist.

Laura asks Mel to continue the story about the old couple, and Mel relates that he used to visit the old man and woman every day to check on their progress. Both of the elderly people are encased in casts and bandages with just small holes for their eyes, noses and mouths. The old man seemed to be especially depressed even though he knew that both he and his wife would be fine. The old man eventually revealed the cause of his depression was that he could not see his wife through the small eyeholes in his cast. Mel is in awe of this type of love where the man is despondent just because he cannot turn his head and look at his wife.

No one sitting at the kitchen table says a word, and Nick notices that the afternoon sunshine is waning in the room, but no one moves to turn on a light. Mel breaks the silence by encouraging his guests to finish the gin so that they all can go to dinner.

Terri senses that Mel is depressed and encourages him to take a pill. Mel simply wants to talk to his children, but he knows that if he phones their house there is a chance he will have to speak to his ex-wife, Marjorie. Terri shares Mel's hope that Marjorie will remarry or die because she is draining Mel financially and emotionally. Mel comments that Marjorie is allergic to bees, so he hopes that she will get stung by a huge swarm of bees.

Mel decides that calling the children may not be a good idea and suggests that the four of them go to dinner now. Laura says that she is very hungry and asks if there is anything in the house to nibble on before they leave. Terri says she will put out some cheese and crackers, but she does not move from her seat.

Mel overturns his glass on the kitchen table spilling the remnants of gin and tonic, declaring that the gin is gone. Terri wants to know what they will do now. Nick can hear his heartbeat and the heartbeats of all sitting at the table, yet no one moves or turns on a light when the sun retreats.

Analysis

It is interesting to note that Mel, who is the dominant character in the story, is a cardiologist. Obviously Mel knows all about the physical properties of the heart but ironically cannot grasp the elusive romantic and emotional characteristics attributed to the heart. It is only with the properties of alcohol which loosens the reserve of Mel and the others at the table that they are able to broach the topic of real love.

Symbolic of Mel's profession, he attempts to dissect the topic of love with the precision with which he normally operates. Analysis and science have no bearing on the emotions of the human heart which frustrates the cardiologist. The author plants Mel as the perfect irony of daily tending to the physical ailments of the heart but unable to grasp the concept of fixing one broken by unrequited or imperfect love.

Although Mel's behavior becomes increasingly offensive with each drink, which he needs to open up, Mel is the only one who is brave enough to broach the topic and to provide any insight into what true love really means. The others at the table are passive and it is not clear if it is the alcohol which inhibits them or perhaps they are simply overwhelmed by Mel's passionate nature.

The more that Mel drinks, the more animated and borderline abusive he becomes toward Terri and there is a sense of repressed hostility between the two. The story is told from Nick's perspective, so it is possible that Mel and Terri's relationship seems rocky in comparison to that of Nick and Laura, because the reader has only one view of the situation.

As Mel continues to speak, especially about the old man in the hospital who was depressed because he could not see his wife through the bandages on his face, there is a wistful tone in his reverie. Terri can sense the longing for such a love in Mel and becomes caustic toward him when she realizes that she does not evoke this level of love and passion in her husband.

Each of the characters is "from somewhere else" as noted in the beginning of the story which is the author's way of pointing out that the two couples are no different from most any other couple in a relationship. There are universal phases and stages of love, and each couple experiences them in their own way.

The theme of imbibing is important in the piece not only because it is the form of entertainment for the evening, but also because it is necessary to loosen the conversation and turn it to the elusive topic of love. The liquor does its job, and by the end of the evening, the depressant characteristics have taken hold. No one at the table is buoyed up by the topic, but rather they sit in silence in the dark, numb from the alcohol and numb to the effects of true love, whatever it is.

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Characters

Laura

Laura is Nick's wife. They have been together for a year and a half. She is thirty five years old and a legal secretary. The narrator describes her as "easy to be with." Nick's depiction of Laura is based on the continuing "honeymoon" tone of their relationship. Laura's comments and her expressions of affection for Nick are presented in marked contrast to the biting tenor of the exchanges between Terri and Mel.

Mel McGinnis

Mel is a friend of the narrator, and husband of Terri. He is a cardiologist and is described as: "forty-five years old. He was tall and rangy with curly soft hair. His face and arms were brown from the tennis he played." Mel, clearly an alcoholic, is the dominant voice in the conversation between the two couples, and the tone of the conversation changes as he becomes increasingly drunk. Mel is the one who continues to focus on the question of "what we talk about when we talk about love." He brings up Terri's abusive ex-husband as a negative example of love. He then talks about an old couple who were almost killed in a car accident as an example of the "love" he's talking about. Mel's behavior also changes with his drunkenness, as "when he was sober, his gestures, all his movements, were precise, very careful." As he becomes drunker, his comments to his wife take on an increasingly menacing tone, and he begins to seem capable of the abusive behavior Terri's ex-husband had exhibited toward her. He eventually decides that he wishes to call his kids, who live with his ex-wife, then decides not to. He effectively turns the conversation between the two couples to the silence with which the story ends when he dumps his shot-glass upside down, spilling its contents on the table.

Nick

Nick is the narrator. He is thirty eight years old but beyond that does not describe himself or what he does for a living. He primarily plays the part of observer, as his contributions to the conversation are minimal. Nick's perspective on his relationship with Laura, whom he's been with for a year and a half, is in marked contrast to his observations of the menacing tone of the relationship between Mel and Terri. He is clearly in love with Laura and believes their relationship to be in the category of true love. Because Nick is the first-person narrator, the reader is given only his perspective of the other characters and is left to wonder if perhaps his relationship with Laura is bound to take the bitter turn toward the veiled hostility of Terri and Mel's relationship.

Teresa

Teresa is the second wife of Mel, who is also her second husband. She is described as: "a bone-thin woman with a pretty face, dark eyes, and brown hair that hung down her back. She liked necklaces made of turquoise, and long pendant earrings." The topic of "love" first revolves around a discussion of her abusive former husband Ed, who tried to kill her, made threats to Mel, and eventually shot himself in the head, taking three days to die from it, during which Terri stayed at his bedside. Terri's behavior toward Mel walks a line between caution and menace; like Mel's comments to her, her comments to him, while infused with terms of endearment, such as "honey," smack of a deep-seated bitterness that is never directly expressed. It seems that, in her marriage to Mel, she is in some ways repeating her relationship with her abusive ex-husband.

Terri

See Teresa

Themes

Love

The central theme of this story is love. The two couples spend the evening drinking gin and discussing the nature of "real love." The narrator explains that "we somehow got on the subject of love." It is Mel who insists on returning to the topic of love. He believes that "love was nothing less than spiritual love." They then turn to the topic of Terri's abusive former husband Ed, who eventually shot himself in the head and died. Terri and Mel, both of them married for the second time, debate whether or not Ed really loved Terri. She claims that Ed "loved her so much he tried to kill her." Mel insists that "that's not love."

Mel eventually describes to them an example of what he considers to be "real love," the old couple who had nearly died in a car accident. This conversation about, as Mel puts it, "what we talk about when we talk about love" is many-layered, however. While they discuss the topic, getting drunker all the while, Terri and Mel exhibit an increasingly menacing tone to their interactions with one another. Although they are soft-spoken and civil on the surface, they express a deep-seated anger and resentment toward one another. The narrator, Nick, meanwhile, clearly perceives his relationship with his wife Laura as one of real love, and their warm, affectionate, harmonious interactions with one another seem to demonstrate this. However, as Mel becomes drunker, the atmosphere of subtle but distinct menace seems to pervade the entire room, leaving the two couples sitting in the dark in silence.

There is a sense that the dark underbelly of "real love" has been exposed, and the characters are left in utter despair, unable to move or speak.

Communication

A central theme of Carver's stories is communication between people, especially people in relationships. His characters almost universally lack the ability to articulate their true feelings or to effectively make use of language in conducting their relationships. Carver's minimalist style of writing is especially suited to the exploration of the theme of communication. In minimalist writing, nine-tenths of the story's meaning is submerged below the surface level dialogue and interactions between the characters. Likewise, for the characters themselves, conversation seems to be a means of masking or evading, rather than expressing, their true feelings. The "action" of this story consists primarily of conversation between the four characters, who never even get up from their chairs over the course of the story. Yet while much of the story is taken up with dialogue, the communication between the members of each couple is indicated by their physical gestures, their silences, and, most of all, what the words that remain upspoken.

Marriage and Divorce

Carver's characters have often been divorced at least once and are often remarried. Carver himself first married at age eighteen, later divorced, and remarried shortly before his death from cancer. The characters in this story have experienced divorce and remarriage. Mel's first wife is Marjorie, with whom he has had children, and whom he now supports financially. Terri's first husband was Ed, an abusive man who eventually shot himself. Mel and Terri are now remarried to each other. Nick, who has also been divorced, is now married to Laura. The subject of divorce and remarriage is an important element of the story's focus on the theme of love. Mel first brings up the topic of Terri's abusive former husband, and the two of them debate whether or not Ed truly loved her.

Mel later mentions his ex-wife, whom he once truly loved, but whom he now hates. Mel uses the example of remarriage as evidence of the impermanence of love. He contrasts such shortlived marriages with that of the old couple, who maintained "real love" for one another even through their hardship. Yet despite this touching anecdote, the story as a whole is pervaded by a tone of pessimism as to the permanence of "what we talk about when we talk about love."

Alcoholism

Alcoholism is a pervasive theme in Carver's stories. Carver himself was an alcoholic for over ten years. During his final year of drinking, he was hospitalized on four separate occasions for his alcoholism. He took his last drink in 1977, upon which he became dedicated to recovering from his alcoholism. He has stated in numerous interviews that he was more proud of having quit drinking than of anything else he'd ever done. This story is pervaded by alcohol and alcoholism. All four of the characters spend the evening sitting around drinking gin and tonic. The narrator explains that "the gin and the tonic water kept going around." While they all become drunk, Mel is clearly an alcoholic, and the conversation is most affected by his increasing drunkenness. His interactions with Terri become more bitter, and he becomes even less attuned to those around him. As the story ends, Mel purposefully dumps his glass of gin upside down, allowing it to spill all over the table. He states that the gin is all gone, and it seems as though the conversation runs out with the gin, leaving the two couples in silence and despair.

Style

Narration

The story is told from the first-person restricted point-of-view. The narrator, Nick, describes the interactions between the two couples only from his own perspective. Nick portrays his relationship with his wife, Linda, in glowing terms, full of warmth, affection, and mutual respect. Given the atmosphere of the story, and the tone of the conversation, however, the reader is invited to speculate if perhaps Nick's idealized perception of his marriage may eventually develop the tone of "benign menace" characterized by the relationship between Mel and Terri. Because the story is related in the past tense, the narrator suggests a feeling of nostalgia on Nick's part, for this early period of his marriage.

Setting: "Carver Country"

The story is set around the kitchen table of the McGinnis', in Albuquerque, New Mexico, although the narrator explains that "we were all from somewhere else." This is significant in that many critics agree Carver's settings are not regionally specific, but that his characters and the lives they lead describe a specific segment of white, working-class American life many have dubbed "Carver Country." Carver's widow, the writer Tess Gallagher, has edited a book entitled *Carver Country,* which includes photographs that capture the flavor of "Carver Country," accompanied by excerpts from Carver's letters, stories, and poems. In her introduction, Gallagher explains that "Carver Country was, in fact, an amalgam of feelings and psychic realities which had existed in America, of course, even before Ray began to write about them." She goes on to describe the atmosphere of the world of Carver's fiction as pervaded by "a current of benign menace." Others have described "Carver Country" as "Hopelessville, USA" because his characters occupy a class standing that leaves them without hope for financial or personal improvement. While the characters in this story seem to be more of the professional class (Mel is a cardiologist), the atmosphere in which they exist does carry "a current of benign menace" in terms of the relationship between Mel and Terri, which is characterized by a surface-level civility thinly covering a deep-seated anger and resentment. Over the course of their conversation, an atmosphere of "hopelessness" about the possibility of real love descends upon the two couples.

Closing Imagery

Critics have debated about the way in which Carver characteristically ends his stories. His endings have been described as "tableaus," providing a visual image, frozen in time, and infused with ambiguity. This story has such an ending: "I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark." There is no direct

information indicating the future of each of the couples, leaving the reader to speculate on indirect elements of the story. Some critics have criticized Carver's ambiguous endings as cliché and unsatisfying to the reader. Others, however, have praised the "photo-realist" detail of Carver's tableau endings and asserted that the ambiguity invites the reader to actively engage in the story and characters, in order to draw his or her conclusions as to their fate.

Historical Context

John Gardner

John Gardner (1933-1982), an American novelist and poet, was one of Carver's first writing teachers. Gardner is perhaps best known for his novel *Grendel* (1971), which is a retelling of the traditional Beowulf story from the perspective of the monster. His novel *October Light* (1976) won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Gardner was also a critic, and wrote two books aimed at aspiring writers: *On Becoming a Novelist* (1983) and *The Art of Fiction* (1984), both published after his death.

John Cheever

John Cheever (1912-1982) was a close friend of Carver, as well as his colleague and fellow fiction writer. In contrast to Carver, whose stories centered on the working poor, Cheever, a novelist and short story writer, was known for his middle-class suburban settings and characters. Among his best known works are *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories* (1953), *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), his first novel, which won a National Book Award, and *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Because of his clear prose style and ability to capture the social milieu of suburban America, critics have dubbed him "the Chekhov of the suburbs."

Robert Altman and Shortcuts

Screenwriter and film director Robert Altman (born 1925) adapted a collection of Carver's short stories to the screen in the 1993 feature film *Short Cuts.* Altman first won national attention for his film *M*A*S*H* (1970), which takes place at a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital during the Korean War, but is a commentary on the Vietnam War. Altman became known for his innovative style, which utilized an ensemble cast, stressed atmosphere and character over plot, and made use of multiple microphones to create an affect of overlapping dialogue. Altman's other films of note include *Nashville,* about a political election set in the milieu of the country music scene; *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), a revisionist Western starring Warren Beatty and Julie Christie; *The Long Goodbye* (1973), based on the style of the Raymond Chandler detective novel; and *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), based on a stage play and starring Cher. *The Player* (1992) includes an all-star ensemble cast in a spoof of the milieu of the Hollywood film industry.

Minimalism

Carver's writing style has been referred to as "minimalist," because of his rigorously sparse prose. Minimalism began as a movement in the visual arts, primarily in the United States, in the 1960s. The minimalists were responding to the abstract

expressionism of the 1950s. Minimalism in the visual arts was based on the principal that a work of art should not refer to anything real, but only to its own visual properties. Minimalism in music was largely inspired by minimalism in the visual arts. Minimalist music is characterized by simple, repetitive compositions. Philip Glass (born 1937), whose style is characterized by monotonous repetition and sparse composition, was a leading composer in minimalist music in the 1960s. Some of his most famous compositions are the operas *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), and *The Voyage* (1992), which was commissioned by the New York Metropolitan Opera.

Alcoholics Anonymous

Carver's stories often include characters who are alcoholics, and depict the ways in which alcoholism can affect relationships between people. Carver himself was an alcoholic for over ten years, until he took his last drink in 1977. The organization Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), devoted to helping alcoholics quit drinking and stay sober, was an important influence on Carver's life, and he considered his recovery from alcoholism to be his greatest achievement in life. Alcoholics Anonymous originated in 1935 when two friends, William Griffith Wilson (1895-1971), a stockbroker, and Robert Holbrook Smith (1879-1950), a surgeon, got together to help each other quit drinking. They published the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1939, which put forth the program they had devised. There are now approximately two million members of AA throughout the world. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, there are an estimated 5,400,000 alcoholics in the United States at any given time.

Critical Overview

Raymond Carver is best known for his four major collections of short stories. His first collection published by a major press, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), comprised stories written over a period of fourteen years. The second, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), established his national reputation as a leading short story writer. The third, *Cathedral* (1984), is considered Carver's masterpiece. The fourth, *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories* (1988), includes major revisions of previously published stories.

Carver is perhaps best known for his characterization of the sector of struggling white, working poor Americans and the atmosphere of despair and defeat in which they take place. Adam Meyer claims that "of the writers who attempted to depict the history of this 'blue collar despair,' none did so as fully and accurately as Raymond Carver." Carver himself was born into a working poor family, his father a laborer at a sawmill, and Carver occupied a variety of blue-collar jobs before landing his first white-collar job. Critics have dubbed this milieu "Carver Country," indicating that it represents a significant sector of American life, regardless of regional specificity.

Adam Meyer explains that "one thing Carver Country is not is a particular geographic location," noting that "the great majority of Carver's stories . . . take place in regionally anonymous indoor settings." Meyer describes typical Carver characters as: "primarily employed, when they are employed at all, as blue-collar workers—waitresses, mill or factory workers, mechanics, mail-carriers, sales clerks, motel managers, hairdressers. For relaxation they play bingo, watch television, or go fishing or hunting." Describing the atmosphere of Carver's stories, Meyer points out that the characters' "marginal lives are filled with failure, deterioration, disenchantment, and despair, leading many critics to designate Carver Country 'Hopeless-ville.'"

Tess Gallagher, however, has defended the positive spirit of "Carver Country," despite the struggles of his characters: "In his stories Ray had been able, in a likeness to the voices and perceptions of the people themselves, to reveal the spiritual tenacity by which these people survived in spite of their limited means, and his readers at all economic levels of the population had been moved toward new awareness."

Carver is widely credited with inspiring a renaissance in the short story form in American literature. Meyer states that "although Carver was reluctant to claim too much personal credit for this resurgence" in the short story form, "there is no doubt that he played a significant part in that development." Meyer also notes that "Carver played a significant part in another revival, that of realist writing." While the 1970s were dominated by experimental, "postmodern" literary form, Carver wrote stories about real people in real settings. Gentry and Stull point out that, during the 1980s, "Carver was regularly cast as a 'godfather' to younger American neorealists, a role he neither claimed nor wanted."

Upon publication, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* received immediate and glowing critical acclaim, earning front page coverage in the *New York Times Book*

Review as well as a favorable review in the *New York Review of Books.* Meyer explains that "this was to be the volume that would firmly establish Carver as an important writer." The stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* are considered the epitome of Carver's sparse, minimalist writing style. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull refer to the volume as Carver's "minimalist masterpiece."

While Carver himself disliked the use of the term, and considered it partly an insult, many aspiring writers attempted to copy this style for years to come. Runyon asserts that "Carver has been the most influential minimalist . . . while at the same time the least representative." Runyon has stated that this volume "is the most minimalist of Carver's collections." Asserting that "the stories have been paired to the bone," Runyon explains, "In this volume Carver went the farthest he ever had towards a terse-ness that is almost silence." Adam Meyer claims that the writing style in this volume is "an exaggerated form of minimalism," later referring to it as "the finest book minimalism has to offer." He goes on to state that these stories "continue to embody minimalism at its most distinctive," explaining: "The collection has been nicknamed the 'minimalist bible,' and when readers and critics consider Carver a minimalist they generally have this volume in mind." Meyer concludes that "because it is the volume that established Carver as a major literary figure, it has remained the collection most associated with him." Gentry and Stull note that "the bare-boned collection proved immensely influential on a younger generation of short-story writers coming of age in the 1980s."

Gentry and Stull assert that "by the late 1980s there could be little doubt that [Carver] was the foremost short-story writer of his generation." Meyer claims that "Carver's influence" on American literature "is undeniable." He explains that "at the time of his death in 1988 . . . Carver was seemingly at the height of his powers and popularity. Since his death, though, his popularity has continued to grow, along with critical estimation of his work."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses Carver's use of figurative language.

Carver is best known for his minimalist writing style, as embodied in a sparse use of language and paired down prose. He is also known as a neo-realist, capturing the working class milieu of blue-collar America with his mundane, naturalistic, everyday dialogue. Nevertheless, he does make use of figurative language throughout "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" by exploring its central themes of love, relationships, communication, and alcoholism. Through the imagery of the knight's armor, the beekeeper's protective clothing, the "pill" and the word "heart," Carver demonstrates that the surface level conversation of his four characters is only the tip of an emotional iceberg.

Since the character of Mel dominates the conversation, much of the figurative language is expressive of his own feelings about the subject of love. The image of the human "heart" takes on figurative connotations in the story, as it is referred to both in the mechanical sense, of the functioning of the human heart, and the symbolic sense, as the organ of love. Mel is a cardiologist, a doctor who operates on people's hearts. The opening sentences of the story, in retrospect, play on the irony of Mel, a heart doctor, claiming to be an expert on matters of the heart: "My friend Mel McGinnis was talking. Mel McGinnis is a cardiologist, so sometimes that gives him the right." Mel even describes his own work as that of "just a mechanic," marking the difference between expertise in heart surgery and knowledge of "true love." When he tells the story of the old couple injured in the near-fatal car accident, the word "heart" again takes on a double meaning. Mel concludes his story, in which the old man and woman are so bandaged up that they cannot see each other even though their beds are next to each other in the same hospital room, by stating that "the man's heart was breaking because he couldn't turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife." Mel is using the word "heart" in the figurative sense here, but it also refers back to the fact that Mel himself had been the attending cardiologist for the old couple in the aftermath of the car accident.

Another central element of figurative speech in this story revolves around Mel's mention that, if he could come back in a different life, he would want to be a "knight." Mel's fascination with the armor worn by a knight is perhaps a heavyhanded image of Mel's need to protect himself emotionally against the ravages of love. Mel explains that "you were pretty safe wearing all that armor." The image is extended to suggest that Mel's protective emotional armor has failed to protect him against the dangers of new love: "It was all right being a knight until gunpowder and muskets and pistols came along." Mel goes on to expand upon his fascination with the protective armor of knights: "what I liked about knights, besides their ladies, was that they had that suit of armor, you know, and they couldn't get hurt very easy." Mel is expressing a desire to be protected from getting "hurt" at an emotional level in his relationships with others.

At this point, the discussion of the knight turns on a pun that comes out of Mel's misuse of the term "vessel" when he means "vassal." A vassal is a servant to another, and Mel, using vessel by accident, attempts to point out that even knights were subservient to others. The idea of servitude is extended symbolically when Mel points out, "But then everyone is always a vessel to someone." At this point Terri corrects him, supplying the proper term, vassal for vessel.

Mel's incorrect use of vessel has further figurative implications. Mel is an alcoholic, and a vessel is an object designed to contain something, usually in reference to a liquid, as a cup or chalice. Through this play on words, the connection is made to Mel's use of alcohol, which he drinks out of a vessel, or glass, as his means of protective armor against emotional injury. Furthermore, a vessel, such as an "empty vessel" may be read figuratively to indicate that everyone is a vessel to be filled with the love, false or true, of another.

Nick, the narrator, points out to Mel that the armor worn by knights had its drawbacks. Nick's comment extends the metaphor of the armor as emotional armor in explaining that one's emotional defenses, or armor, can end up suffocating the knight in the name of protecting him from harm:

But sometimes they suffocated in all that armor, Mel. They'd even have heart attacks if it got too hot and they were too tired and worn out.

The image of the heart comes up here, implying that the armor Mel uses to protect himself from emotional suffering in the name of love (a "heart attack") can be the very cause of his suffering. In reference to Mel's alcoholism, his use of alcohol to protect himself from heartache may actually lead to a heart attack in terms of the demise of his marriage and other personal relationships, as well as some form of heart attack in the sense that alcoholism can be fatal. (This may seem like a leap of logic, but, given that this story was written not long after Carver nearly died from alcoholism and eventually quit drinking, it is not an unreasonable interpretation.) Mel's interest in armor as a means of protecting himself from love is made clear when he adds that, were a knight to be made vulnerable by the weight of his armor, "Some vassal would come along and spear the bastard in the name of love."

The imagery of "taking a pill" combines several figurative themes in the story. As Mel becomes more clearly drunk, his conversation acquires an antagonistic edge.

'He's depressed,' Terri said. 'Mel, why don't you take a pill?' Mel shook his head. 'I've taken everything there is. "We all need a pill now and then,' I said. 'Some people are born needing them,' Terri said.

Here, the characters themselves are consciously using the phrase "to take a pill" in a figurative sense. But the pill imagery also echoes with the fact that Mel is a doctor, whose job is, in general terms, to give people pills to make them feel better. Mel's own pill is clearly alcohol, and his comment that "I've taken everything there is" expresses a deep despair at ever finding a cure for his personal heartaches.

The figurative language combining the use of alcohol, as contained in a vessel, or the swallowing of a pill, as administered by a doctor, as a means of curing the emotional pain caused by love, is also expressed in Terri' s explanation that her abusive ex-husband, Ed, drank rat poison when she left him. Like Mel's consumption of alcohol, or his figurative need "to take a pill," Ed's consumption of rat poison is his own self-destructive attempt to medicate his own emotional pain in the face of his "love" for Terri. Terri explains the effect of the poison; Ed's life was saved at the hospital, "but his gums went crazy from it. I mean they pulled away from his teeth. After that, his teeth stood out like fangs." The image of Ed's teeth turning into fangs symbolizes the fact that Ed, an extremely violent and abusive man, is akin to a beast who threatens Terri with his fangs. More indirectly, there is a suggestion that, j ust as Ed's drinking of rat poison in an attempt to cure his emotional pain turns him into a fanged beast, so Mel's drinking of alcohol in an attempt to cure his own emotional pain may be turning him into a beast, posing a threat of danger to Terri.

Mel later uses the imagery of a beekeeper's protective clothing to express a similar desire for some form of protection from love. In discussing his ex-wife Marjorie, he explains that she is allergic to bees, saying that "if I'm not praying she'll get married again, I'm praying she'll get herself stung to death by a swarm of f—ing bees." He then makes what is perhaps his most outwardly menacing gesture toward his wife: "'Bzzzzzzz,' Mel said, turning his fingers into bees and buzzing them at Terri's throat."

Mel's expression of hatred for his ex-wife and his wish that she would die is used as a thinly veiled expression of a similar hatred for Terri. The gesture of buzzing his fingers around her neck combines the figurative image of murder by bee sting into a more literal physical gesture threateningly aimed at Terri's throat. The armor imagery is echoed here in his description of the beekeeper's protective clothing:

Sometimes I think I'll go there dressed like a beekeeper. You know, that hat that's like a helmet with the plate that comes down over your face, the big gloves, and the padded coat? I'll knock on the door and let loose a hive of bees in the house.

The double implications of the word heart come back into play in the closing image of the story. As the two couples sit in the dark in silence, the narrator explains, "I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart." The narrator uses the literal image of a silence so profound that he can actually hear the beating of his own and the others' hearts to express a symbolic feeling that he can "hear everyone's heart." It is as if the excess of human emotion aroused by the discussion of true love hums about the room without any hope of articulate expression between the two couples. The term vessel, mentioned earlier, is also echoed with Mel's enigmatic gesture in the closing moments of the story, when he turns his glass of gin upside down on the table. Mel has emptied his vessel of alcohol, the "gin's gone," and they are left with nothing but an ominous feeling of emotional emptiness.

Although Carver is considered a minimalist writer, whose stories take on meaning more in what is not said than what is said, his use of figurative language gives depth to his stories by expanding upon their central themes.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Meyer describes the minimal nature of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," and examines the story's themes of "the difficulty of sustaining relationships" and "the effect of alcoholism as a contributing factor to that difficulty."

Carver had stopped drinking by the time *Furious Seasons* was published, but he had not yet returned to writing. When he did, his stories were markedly different from what they had been. The obsessions were the same, but the stories were much darker, reflecting the hell of marital discord and alcoholism that Carver himself had experienced. Their style, moreover, was an exaggerated form of minimalism. Whereas he had once worried that a story like "Neighbors" might be "too thin, too elliptical and subtle," Carver was now writing stories that would make "Neighbors" appear positively lush. As one critic has pointed out, in these new texts "language is used so sparingly and the plots are so minimal that the stories at first seem to be mere patterns with no flesh and life in them. . . . Characters frequently have no names or only first names and are so briefly described that they appear to have no physical presence at all; certainly they have no distinct identity." Carver, looking back on the volume several years after its initial publication, told an interviewer that the texts in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* were "so pared down. Everything I thought I could live without I just got rid of, I cut out." Urged on by his editor Gordon Lish, he began implementing Hemingway's "theory of omission. If you can take anything out, take it out, as doing so will make the work stronger. Pare, pare, and pare some more." That phrase could in fact serve as a motto for *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,* although critics have more often pointed to the following lines from "On Writing" : "Get in, get out. Don't linger." The stories here are indeed shorter, on average, than those in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and *Furious Seasons.* They also have a more desolate outlook, which is amplified by their astringency of tone. Nowhere is Carver's minimalist aesthetic more clearly visible than in the five stories from *Furious Seasons* that reappear here in reduced versions, having been "subjected to rigorous cutting." Although Carver eventually reacted against this extremely pared-down style, the stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* continue to embody minimalism at its most distinctive. The collection has been nicknamed the "minimalist bible," and when readers and critics consider Carver a minimalist they generally have this volume in mind. Because it is the volume that established Carver as a major literary figure, it has remained the collection most often associated with him, even if it is, as we shall later see, his least representative. . . .

The title story is the collection's longest and undoubtedly its greatest achievement, as well as being a fitting climax to the volume. Although its plot is rather thin, several of the obsessions that have run through the collection—the difficulty of sustaining relationships, the effect of alcoholism as a contributing factor to that difficulty, the problem of communication—are given their most extensive treatment. As the four characters (the narrator, Nick; his wife, Laura; their friend Mel McGinnis, a cardiologist; and his wife, Terri) sit around the table drinking gin, Carver is able to turn the question of

love in several different directions. For this reason, more than one critic has likened the story's situation to Plato's *Symposium,* which does indeed seem to be the model for the dialogue. Nevertheless, "the relative articulateness of these characters by no means enables them to reach a satisfactory conclusion." The only resolution reached in this version of the symposium is that we really have no idea What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.

As the story opens, Terri, Mel's second wife, states that Ed, "the man she lived with before she lived with Mel[,] loved her so much he tried to kill her." Mel argues, however, that she cannot really call Ed's emotions love. Having been a divinity student before he became a doctor, Mel feels that true love must contain a spiritual dimension. He argues that "'the kind of love I'm talking about is [an absolute]. The kind of love I'm talking about, you don't try to kill people.'" Terri's continuing insistence that what Ed felt was love only serves to anger Mel, and we begin to see signs of strain in their own relationship. To show what real love is, Mel tells the story of an old couple he had treated in the hospital. While recovering from a terrible car accident, the husband became depressed because, due to his bandages, "'he couldn't turn his g-dd-n head and *see* his g-dd-ed wife.'" This old couple symbolizes for Mel what the old couple in the gazebo meant for Holly, a sign of stable and long-lasting love. During his narration, however, he and Terri begin to argue more openly. When Terri kids Mel about sounding drunk, he quietly responds, "'Just shut up for once in your life. . . . Will you do me a favor and do that for a minute?.'" Mel begins to explain about the old couple's injuries, how they had only lived because they were wearing their seat belts, and Terri interrupts to say that Mel's story is a public service message. Mel doesn't find her jest the least bit funny. He is concerned with the true meaning of love, and he presses the point about the length of this older couple's commitment because, as he points out, all four of this symposium's participants have been married more than once. As the story points out, "the greatest obstacle to any ideal love turns out to be the transitoriness of love." Mel notes that "'sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife too'" and he reminds the other couple that they "'both loved other people before [they] met each other.'" He even goes on to say that, should any of them die, he feels it wouldn't be long before the widowed person would remarry. This doesn't sit well with Terri, naturally, and the tension mounts.

Counterpoised to the disintegrating relationship of Mel and Terri are Nick and Laura, still-glowing newlyweds who, "in addition to being in love . . . like each other and enjoy one another's company." When Laura is asked whether she would call Ed's feelings toward Terri love, for example, she says, "'who can judge anyone else's situation?,'" and Nick tells us that "I touched the back of Laura's hand. She gave me a quick smile. I picked up Laura's hand. It was warm, the nails polished, perfectly manicured. I encircled the broad wrist with my fingers, and I held her." Such physical intimacy continues throughout the story, although Terri tells them that they're "'still on the honeymoon'" and must "'wait awhile'" to see what married life is really like. She seems to be making fun of them, yet her "remarks contain a hint of regret; she would like very much, it seems, to receive gestures of affection like those between Nick and Laura." They are still in the first throes of love, whereas her marriage to Mel seems to have become stale.

At the end of the story, the gin is all gone and the four people, who had been planning to go eat at a new restaurant, seem exhausted and reluctant to move. Terri says that she will "'put out some cheese and crackers,'" but she makes no move to do so. Suddenly the story's tension level increases dramatically. Nick states that "I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark." As with other Carver stories of menace, such as "The Bath," the final note here is one of suspension, of tension threatening to explode but not yet ignited. The conversation began in the light of afternoon, but the participants fall silent in the dark of night and the story ends "in anxious isolation, enervation, and stasis." Although one critic has asserted that "these moments together, deeply imbued with shared sensibilities, make up for the antagonisms, the regrets, the flirtations, [and] the spilled gin," such comments seem to miss the mark. Carver's use of the word "noise" in the passage indicates that, rather than having achieved some kind of peace beyond words, the four talkers have reached a point where no communication is effective, where nothing can be heard. The seemingly imminent explosion may be the one between Mel and Terri, but Nick and Laura are necessarily dragged into it and implicated as well, since the newly married couple cannot avoid seeing themselves as Mel and Terri in a few years. As with all of Carver's first-person narratives, furthermore, we must ask ourselves who Nick is telling the story to, and when. The implication here is that he is fondly remembering that evening as a time when he and Laura shared a closeness that perhaps no longer exists.

Ultimately, the answer to Mel's question "'What do any of us really know about love?'" appears to be "not very much." A humorous digres sion in the middle of the story underscores this point. Mel, whose definition of love is based on "the chivalric code," asserts that he would like to have been a knight, because armor made it harder to get hurt. The narrator tells him, however, that sometimes the knights would die because they got too hot in their suits or because they fell off their horses and didn't have the energy to stand up, whereupon they could be trampled by their own horses or killed by rivals. What follows is a subtle but telling bit of dialogue:

"That's right," Mel said. "Some vassal would come along and spear the bastard in the name of love. Or whatever the f-k it was they fought over in those days." "Same things we fight over today," Terri said. Laura said, "Nothing's changed."

When it comes to talking about love—and understanding what we mean when we do so — Carver indicates treat we are still in the dark ages.

Perhaps the most quoted quip concerning *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,* and for good reason, comes from Donald Newlove' s review of the collection; he writes that the book includes "seventeen tales of Hopelessville, its marriages and alcoholic wreckage, told in a prose as sparingly clear as a fifth of iced Smirnoff." Newlove here highlights the main features, both of matter and manner, that unify the collection and give it a great deal of cumulative impact. By the end of the volume, having seen so much despair and so few spots of promise, we are as fatigued and numbed as the characters themselves. In these stories, then, Carver brilliantly weds his minimalistic style to his dispiriting themes. About the end of "One More Thing," for

example, Hamilton E. Cochrane notes that "this conclusion reflects the unfinished business that is L. D.'s life. L. D. can make no sense of it—can make no connections, draw no conclusions—and the fragmentary and inconclusive form of the story itself seems to reinforce this." This marriage of form and content marks the style that Carver would become best known for, and that would so influence younger writers.

Many critics, particularly ones who don't like him, continue to take their measure of Carver from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,* which is, indeed, the finest book that minimalism has to offer. Yet, as Jay McInerney has noted, "Carver's career as a story writer and prose stylist had several distinct phases; only his [third] collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,* can really be called minimalism—a conscious attempt to leave almost everything out." Carver himself noted that it "had been in many ways a watershed book for me, but it was a book I didn't want to duplicate or write again," and, following *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,* Carver's stories did indeed change again, becoming broader, fuller, and more generous. We have passed through the narrowest point of the hourglass of Carver's minimalism—as exemplified by the truncations of the *Furious Seasons* stories—and we are now ready to broaden the form again as we turn to *Fires* and, especially, *Cathedral.*

Source: Adam Meyer, "The Middle Years: 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,'" in *Raymond Carver,* Twayne, 1995, pp. 86-87, 108-11, 113.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Campbell discusses the "several varieties of emotion existing under the single rubric of love" in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love."

Readers often complain that nothing happens in stories like "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Two couples in this story—Mel and Terri McGinnis and Nick and Laura—sit around a table, drinking gin and talking about love. Several varieties of emotion, existing under the single rubric of love, enter into the conversation either in passing or at length—spiritual love, carnal love, chivalric love, idealized devotion, and even the sort of complex torment that exhibits itself in abuse, often murder, and sometimes suicide. Mel the cardiologist does most of the talking, and much of that about Terri's former lover, Ed, who abused her, threatened murder, and finally succeeded on his second attempt at suicide.

Mel's other anecdote focuses on an elderly couple injured in a car wreck. The injured husband drifts into depression because the bandages prevent his seeing his wife while they are in the hospital.

That is it—ostensibly. But of course that is not all there is to the story. The little ironies and revelations of the story help to develop a complete narrative that no summary can ever sufficiently provide. Although not explicit, they are capable of revealing the inability of these characters to see themselves or each other honestly.

The most graphic scene is Terri's anecdote: Ed beat her one night, dragging her around the room by her ankles, repeating, "I love you, I love you, you b—." She says Ed loved her so much he tried to kill her. Terri's interpretation of such evident ambivalence agrees with Ed's—it is love. That an individual deems his life not worth living without her must seem to her the highest testimony of her value. That Ed might have killed himself as one last attempt to punish her or that he might have taken his life as an act of self-loathing is unacceptable to Terri. That interpretation would devalue her.

Up to a point it is advantageous for Mel to see more clearly than Terri. If he sees that Ed's passion hardly qualifies as love, he need not feel quite as emotionally threatened by the dead lover, but only up to a point. It would not, for example, enhance Mel's self-image for him to see the parallel between Ed's violence toward Terri and his violent feelings toward his former wife. "She's allergic to bees. . . . I'm praying she'll get herself stung to death by a swarm of f-ing bees." Then again a moment later, "Sometimes I think I'll go up there dressed like a beekeeper. You know, that hat that's like a helmet with the plate that comes down over your face, the big gloves, and the padded coat? I'll knock on the door and let loose a hive of bees in the house." Nor does Nick, the narrator of the story, his girlfriend, or Terri seem to notice the parallel pattern. It remains invisible to all but the reader.

At the same time, Mel may sense his own susceptibility to sentimentality (in his desire to be a knight), immediate gratification (in eating, drinking, and getting high), and

compulsiveness, features of arrested emotional development shared with Ed, for he says about himself, ' I like food. . . . If I had to do it all over again, I'd be a chef, you know?" Mel's alcoholism and attraction to pills also testify to this self-gratifying impulse. Spiritual love, the idealized state of chivalric love, and the devotion of the elderly couple, having made a strong impression on him, may represent antidotes to or, at least, havens from his emotional immaturity. Or, as is more likely, extensions of that immaturity, for such imaginary escapes are further proof of underdevelopment.

He characterizes the years he spent in the seminary as the most important years of his life, yet he left that life. He maintains that had he the opportunity to come back in a different life, he would come back as a knight, an impossible, sentimental wish. Moreover, he idealizes the elderly couple's love when he asserts that their example "ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we're talking about when we talk above love." This idealized state amazes Mel, who says, "I mean, it was killing the old fart just because he couldn't *look* at the f-ing woman."

Nothing happens. Four people sit around a table talking about love. Or so it seems, but the term needs defining. Distinct, sometimes opposite states are experienced under the name of love: spiritual devotion, sexual attraction, fellowship, emotional dependence, and more. From Mel's incredulity, the reader can rightly infer that nothing he has ever felt as love could be favorably compared with what he found in the elderly man who was depressed because he couldn't see his wife. Whatever these characters sitting around the table drinking gin speak of when they talk about love, it is different from what he has seen in the hospital.

Different enough for him to realize that their talk around the table and elsewhere never approaches the real thing, and yet Mel remains partly blind to the truths of love and self. Not so the careful reader, for a while at least, because Carver dramatically juxtaposes varieties of experience that, when seen together, sharpen their lines of difference and no longer pass unquestioned for love. In life though, just as in literature, moments of the most vivid clarity soon fade, leaving us to fall back on signs and symbols to guide us in love or in life.

Source: Ewing Campbell, "Breakthrough: 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,'" in *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Twayne, 1992, pp. 45-47.

Adaptations

A collection of Carver's short stories was adapted to the screen and made into a composite narrative film entitled *Short Cuts* (1993), directed by Robert Altman.

Topics for Further Study

While he consistently disclaimed the label, Carver's writing style, particularly in the stories of the collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,* is consistently referred to by critics in terms of "minimalism." The term minimalism has also been used to describe stylistic trends in both art and music. Find out more about minimalism in either art or music and pick a minimalist artist in either of these mediums to learn more about. How does the minimalist style of Carver's story translate into the medium of the artist or composer you have chosen?

Carver has often cited the nineteenth-century short story writer and playwright Anton Chekhov as one of the greatest influences on his own writing. Read a short story by Chekhov. In what ways does Carver's writing style seem to draw from that of Chekhov? In what ways is Carver's style markedly different from Chekhov's?

A central focus of the discussion between the four characters in Carver's story is on the abusive behavior of Terri's former husband, Ed. Find out more about the prevalence and conditions of domestic violence today. What resources are available to battered women in your town, county, or state? What laws exist at the local, state, or national level to protect battered women? What are some of the difficulties faced by battered women in trying to leave an abusive relationship?

Film director Robert Altman has adapted several of Carver's short stories into a composite feature-length narrative film entitled *Short Cuts.* Read at least one of the stories in the published collection *Short Cuts,* and then watch the film. In what ways does the film translate the atmosphere, characterization, and dialogue of Carver's written stories into the film medium? What elements of these stories are lost in the translation? In what ways does the film medium add to the meaning of the short stories?

Robert Altman is a much-praised filmmaker in his own right. Carver himself was an admirer of Altman's film *Nashville.* Learn more about Altman's directing career, his other films, and the most notable elements of his film style. In what ways are Altman's sensibilities as a filmmaker similar to Carver's sensibilities as a writer? In what ways is Altman's style completely different from that of Carver's?

Compare and Contrast

1960s-1970s: The dominant trend in fiction is in the style of experimental, "postmodern" writing. The American short story is considered to be at a low point.

1990s: Carver's turn to "neo-realist" subject-matter, written in a "minimalist" style, which goes against the grain of postmodern fiction, is credited with both revitalizing the genre of the American short story, and inspiring a generation of writer's attempting to imitate his minimalist style. Because of the large number of Carver imitators, however, a backlash against minimalist writing soon follows. Carver's entire oeuvre is now seen in a broader perspective, and Carver is indisputably recognized as the foremost American short fiction writer of his generation.

1960s-1970s: While Carver's story, published in 1982, focuses on the theme of domestic violence, the term itself is not mentioned. The battered women's movement, which begins in the early-to-mid-1970s, grows out of feminist efforts at anti-rape legislation. Early efforts to help battered women include providing safe refuge for women and children escaping abusive situations, and lobbying efforts to protect women from abuse.

1990s: The awareness of the problem of battered women grows throughout the 1980s and 1990s: there is increased funding for and availability of battered women's shelters, increased sensitivity to the problems of battered women in law enforcement training, the passing of numerous laws designed to protect battered women, including anti-stalking laws adopted in many states and laws against marital rape, and the effective use of "battered women's syndrome" in court.

1930s: Alcoholics Anonymous is founded by two friends, with the seminal text of the organization, Alcoholic's Anonymous, appearing in 1939.

1990s: By the late twentieth century, there are approximately two million members of Alcoholics Anonymous throughout the world.

What Do I Read Next?

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976) is Carver's first major collection of short stories. It includes works developed over a period of fourteen years.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (1981) is Carver's second major short story collection. It is considered to be the epitome of Carver's "minimalist" style.

Cathedral (1984) is collection of short stories considered Carver's masterpiece. The title story, "Cathedral" is recognized as Carver's best.

Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories (1988) is Carver's fourth major collection of short stories. It includes revised versions of previously published stories.

Carver Country: The World of Raymond Carver (1990), with photographs by Bob Adelman, is a posthumously published collection of photographs that capture the flavor of the struggling working class world depicted in most of Carver's stories. It includes an introduction by his widowed wife, the poet Tess Gallagher, and excerpts from letters, poems, and stories by Carver.

Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver (1993), edited by William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll, is a collection of essays by friends and fellow writers close to Carver, describing their experiences with him. The book is organized chronologically, according to the various locations around the country in which Carver lived.

Conversations with Raymond Carver (1990), edited by Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, is a collection of previously published interviews with Raymond Carver, organized chronologically.

Further Study

Carver, Raymond, *Short Cuts: Selected Stories,* Vintage, 1991.

This collection contains previously published short stories by Carver, on which Robert Altman's film *Short Cuts* was based. It has an introduction by Altman that discusses the processes of adapting a number of short stories to a single composite narrative film.

Carver, Raymond, and Tom Jenks, eds., *American Short Story Masterpieces,* Delacorte, 1987.

This work is a collection of what the editors determined to be the best American short stories written between the 1950s and the 1980s.

Cheever, John, *The Stories of John Cheever,* Knopf, 1978.

This book is a collection of short stories, originally published between 1946 and 1975, written by Carver's close friend, colleague, and fellow author.

Foote, Shelby, ed., *Anton Chekhov: Early Short Stories, 1883-1888,* Modern Library, 1999.

Foote has collected the early stories of the playwright and fiction writer that Carver has most cited as having influenced his own writing—the Russian writer, Anton Chekhov.

—,*Anton Chekhov: Later Short Stories, 1888-1903,* Modern Library, 1999.

This book presents the later stories by Anton Chekhov.

Gallagher, Tess, *At the Owl Woman Saloon,* Scribner, 1997.

This work is a collection of short stories by Carver's second wife and widow, the poet and fiction writer Tess Gallagher.

Gardner, John, *On Becoming a Novelist,* Harper, 1983.

Gardner's book provides advice to young writers aspiring to write novels. This book includes a forward by Raymond Carver.

Hemingway, Ernest, *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway,* Scribner's, 1987.

This book of short stories is by the American writer to whose sparse prose and terse dialogue Carver's writing style is often compared.

Keyssar, Helene, *Robert Altman's America,* Oxford University Press, 1991.

This work is a critical analysis of the films of Robert Altman, who adapted Carver's short stories to the screen in the film *Short Cuts.*

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Gallagher, Tess, *Carver Country: The World of Raymond Carver,* Scribner, 1990, pp. 8, 11-12.

Gentry, Marshall Bruce, and William L. Stull, eds., *Conversations with Raymond Carver,* University of Mississippi Press, 1990, pp. xii, xiii, xvi.

Meyer, Adam, *Raymond Carver,* Twayne, 1995, pp. ix, 1, 20, 21, 27, 86, 87, 113.

Runyon, Randolph Paul, *Reading Raymond Carver,* Syracuse University Press, 1992, pp. 4, 85.

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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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