Where I'm Calling From Study Guide

Where I'm Calling From by Raymond Carver

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Contents

Introduction

Raymond Carver was at the height of his career when "Where I'm Calling From" first appeared, in the March 15, 1982, issue of the *New Yorker.* The story was included in *The Best American Short Stories,* 1983 and was published in Carver's prizewinning collection *Cathedral,* appearing also in the author's 1988 collection *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories.* The story, about a man struggling to overcome his alcohol problem in a "drying out facility," appears to have some autobiographical elements that harken back to an earlier period in Carver's life when he struggled to overcome a drinking problem which left him unable to work for long periods of time. The story is set in a rehabilitation center in which the unnamed narrator finds himself listening uncomfortably to a fellow patient relate the history of his marriage. Carver, who had been sober for nearly five years by the hide he wrote the story, emphasizes the characters' vulnerability and the uncertainty of their futures. In the story's ambiguous ending, the narrator is not certain what he will say if he actually reaches his estranged wIfe or his girlfriend on the telephone, but the very fact that he is motivated to even make these calls may provide some hope for an end to his numbing isolation.

Carver helped lead what many critics saw as a renaissance of the American short story in the 1970s and early 1980s. At a hide when literature seemed to be dominated by highly self-conscious experimental writing, Carver wrote starkly realistic fiction in a sparse style reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway. Along with writers like Bobbie Ann Mason and Tobias Wolff, Carver came to be seen as a leader of a new "minimalist" school which sought to use language as economically as possible and to depict the lives of ordinary people without sentimentality. Though some dismissed this type of writing as "K-Mart realism" or "TV fiction," Carver won widespread popular and critical acclaim for his work.

Author Biography

Raymond Carver was exposed at a young age to many of the darker aspects of family life and the working world. He was born on May 25, 1938, in Clatskanie, Oregon, into a working-class family that was dominated by his alcoholic, sometimes violent father. Carver started working immediately after high school in the same sawmill as did his father. By age 20, he had a wife, two children, and was heavily in debt. The pressures he faced climaxed when his father was admitted to a psychiatric ward in a hospital-one floor below the room in which his wife was to give birth to their second child.

In 1958, Carver enrolled part-time at Chico State College in northern California and took a literature course from then-unpublished novelist John Gardner, who would become a major influence on his writing. Carver himself commented, however, that during the first half of *his* career one of the strongest influences on him was alcohol. Carver's literary reputation grew slowly as he published short stones, poems, and essays throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, but his chronic alcoholism was disrupting his personal life. He was able to work only sporadically and twice filed for bankruptcy. He was hospitalized four times and nearly died of alcohol poisoning He and his wife divorced in 1978.

Carver often said that the most important day in his life was June 2, 1977, when he finally stopped drinking. He considered It a miracle that alcoholism had not killed him and regarded the remaining years of his life as "pure gravy." His newfound sobriety coincided with a remarkable acceleration in his rise to literary fame. In 1976 his first major press book, a collection of short stones entitled *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* was published by McGraw-Hill and received a National Book Award nomination the following year. Carver finally attained some financial stability by winning a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1978, which was soon followed by several other prestigious awards. During these years, he wrote many prize-winning stories and published two highly acclaimed *collections-What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and *Cathedral.* Carver's domestic life also improved as he began a long-term relationship with fellow writer Tess Gallagher.

Carver continued to hold "the dark view of things," as he called it, even in happier times. "In this second life, this post-drinking life," he told an interviewer, "I still retain a certain sense of pessimism." He continued to draw on experiences from his "bad Raymond days" for the subject matter of his stones, and while some critics believe that Carver's writings after 1981 display a slightly less fatalistic viewpoint, he has consistently been identified as a chronicler of the alienated and the dispossessed. By the time he died of cancer at age 50 in 1988, he was among the most celebrated writers in the world, credited for having breathed new life into the tradition of realistic short fiction in America.

Plot Summary

The story takes place over three days at a residential treatment center for alcoholics-a" drying out facility," as the unnamed narrator calls it. For most of the story, the narrator sits on the front porch with a fellow patient named Joe Penny, or J.P., whom he has just met J.P. is around 30 years old and has never stayed at such a facility before. The narrator is a little older and on his second stay.

Anxious and distracted, the narrator tries to listen to J.P., who has begun rambling about the trauma he had experienced at age 12 when he fell down a dry well and waited for his father to rescue him. Encouraged by the narrator, J.P. then launches into the story of his stormy relationship with Roxy, his wife. He describes his first encounter with her during an afternoon of beer drinking at his friend's house: Roxy, dressed in a work uniform that includes a top hat, has come to clean the chimney. For J.P., It is love at first sight. J.P.'s tale-within-a-tale moves quickly through his courtship with Roxy; the couple soon gets married and has children. He also learns chimney-sweeping from Roxy and becomes a partner in her family's business.

J.P.'s happy domestic situation disintegrates rapidly as his drinking escalates. He and Roxy have violent fights, which leave physical scars on both of them. When J.P. discovers that Roxy is having an affair, he goes "wild," forcibly removing her wedding ring and shredding it with a wire-cutter. The next morning he is arrested for drunk driving on his way to work and loses his license. Having hit rock bottom, he does not protest when his wife's father and brother drop him off at the treatment facility.

J.P. falls silent when the proprietor of the treatment facility joins them on the porch. A robust. cigar-smoking man named Frank Martin, the proprietor points to a hill visible from the porch and announces that the famous writer Jack London used to live there. "But alcohol killed him," he adds. "Let that be a lesson to you."

The narrator then reveals a little about how he came to the facility, though he is less open than J.P. On his first visit, his wife (now estranged) brought him in. This time, he was brought in by his girlfriend after a drinking binge that the two of them began on Christmas Eve.

The day after the narrator's first chat with J.P. is December 31, New Year's Eve. The narrator tries to call his wife, but no one answers. At the treatment center's New Year's Eve dinner, the narrator seems to be the only patient with an appetite. After dinner, the narrator again tries in vain to call his wife and then starts to dial his girlfriend's number. He decides not to complete the call, however, because he knows she bas recently been tested for cancer, and he does not want to hear any bad news she might have gotten from her doctor.

After breakfast on New Year's Day, the narrator again sits On the porch with J.P., who is expecting a visit from Roxy. When she arrives, J.P. introduces the narrator as "my friend." Watching the couple's warm interaction and remembering J.P.'s account of their

first meeting, the narrator asks for and receives a kiss from Roxy, saying "I need some luck." (According to tradition, it is lucky to kiss a chimney-sweep.) Rather than succumb to depression, he thinks again of J.P. and Roxy. This triggers an oddly humorous, bittersweet memory from early in his own marriage.

In the story's ambiguous closing passage, the narrator resolves to call his wife and his girlfriend. He remembers reading a Jack London story, "To Build a Fire," concerning a man who is lost in the frozen Yukon and must build a fire in order to survive. In the story, a branch-full of snow falls and puts the fire out, and the man freezes to death. Perhaps deciding that reaching out to the women in his life is necessary for his own survival, the narrator fantasizes about presenting himself in an honest and direct fashion on the phone. He imagines calling his wife simply to wish her a happy New Year and to tell her "where I'm calling from" without raising his voice or making unrealistic promises. If he reaches his girlfriend, he plans only to say, "Hello sugar. It's me."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story takes place at an alcoholic rehabilitation facility near California's Sonoma Valley during the period between Christmas Day and New Year's Day. It is the narrator's second visit to the facility, which he refers to as Frank Martin's. Shortly after his arrival, he meets Joe Penny, who wants to be called "J.P." The men have only been at the facility for a few days. J.P. is there for the first time and is surprised to find his hands trembling so much from the sudden lack of alcohol that he cannot use them to make gestures as he talks.

The narrator is distracted by his own physical symptoms, the most worrisome of which is a nerve reaction that makes his shoulder and the side of his neck twitch. He feels that something is about to happen, and he wants to hide from it. He watched a man suffer a seizure at breakfast the day before. The man, Tiny, was telling a story about one of his drunken escapades and then suddenly he was on the floor with his legs twitching and his eyes closed. Tiny was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance, and when he returned he was not the same. He did not want to talk about his seizure, and this disappoints the narrator, who wants to know if Tiny had had any warning before it happened. Tiny's experience has made the narrator even more sensitive to the flutters and twitches in his own body and he imagines himself in Tiny's place, lying on the floor, looking up at concerned faces, with somebody's fingers in his mouth so he won't bite his tongue.

The two men - the narrator describes them as drunks - sit outside on the porch at Frank Martin's, smoking cigarettes and flicking their ashes into an old coal bucket. The narrator listens as J.P. tells him about his life and how he came to be at the facility. J.P. begins by talking about how he fell down a dry well when he was twelve years old. He describes how he yelled and yelled for help for a long time, and how being at the bottom of the well had made a lasting impression on him. He describes how he stared at the small blue circle of sky at the top of the well, how a cloud and some birds passed across it, how he listened intently to the rustling of insects in the dirt above him, and heard the sound of the wind. He worried that something would fall on him, and he realized that everything about his life was different at the bottom at the well. Nothing did fall on him, though, and eventually his father found him and pulled him out with a rope. Then his life went on the same as it had before he fell into the well.

J.P. goes on with the narrator's encouragement to talk about how he met his wife when he was nineteen. He was drinking beer at a friend's house when Roxy, a chimney sweep, came to clean the chimney. She was a young and strong woman wearing the traditional top hat of a working chimney sweep, and J.P. fell in love at first sight. He and his friend watched her work, and when she was finished, J.P. followed her outside to ask for a date and to tell her that he wanted to be a chimney sweep too.

The narrator focuses on J.P.'s story, telling him continue and noting that he would have listened to J.P. at that particular moment of his life regardless of what he was talking about. Listening to J.P.'s voice has a calming effect on the narrator and distances him from his own problems.

The following day, after a night of rain, the narrator and J.P. are again on the porch and J.P. describes his courtship of Roxy and their marriage. He tells how he joined the family chimney sweep business to work with his father-in-law and brother-in-law. He had a successful marriage and two children, bought a house, and had everything he ever wanted. Then he started to drink. He started with beer, having a few drinks on his way home from work. Then he graduated to gin-and-tonic. He started to drink on the job and had trouble making it home for dinner. He even started drinking in the morning while brushing his teeth. He became increasingly violent, punching walls and throwing things for no reason.

Just as his drinking escalated, the level of violence in his marriage escalated. Roxy once broke his nose, and he split her lip. They beat each other up in front of their children, but he could not stop drinking. Roxy's father and brother threatened him with a beating if he did not stop, but he could not. Roxy got a boyfriend, and when J.P. found out, he cut her wedding ring into pieces with wire cutters. He was arrested, and his driver's license was taken away so he could not drive to work. Eventually, his father-in-law and brother-in-law hauled him to Frank Martin's and deposited him there, hurrying away as fast as they could.

Both the narrator and J.P. are at Frank Martin's on a voluntary basis. J.P. is there to get his life in order, but he can leave any time. Frank Martin recommended a stay of at least a week and told the narrator that he should think about staying longer. The narrator saw J.P. enter the facility, and they began to talk the next day.

The narrator's experience is different from J.P.'s. This is his second time at the facility, and his girlfriend drove him there in his car. They had been drinking for days, starting the day before Christmas Eve when his girl friend received some bad news about a Pap smear. They went on a binge that lasted until the narrator realized he had to go back into Frank Martin's. He and his girlfriend buy champagne and a bucket of chicken on their way to the facility, trying to make a party of it. When they arrive, the girlfriend returns to the city right away, despite the fact that she is drunk. The narrator wanted her to stay overnight, but he does not blame her for leaving because he knows she has to get back to her job and her teen-aged son, whom he does not like. He also realizes that she has a serious health problem that must be addressed. He speculates that she must have returned home safely, though, or he would have heard something. He believes he will see her again because he left some things at her house. He contrasts his second installment at the facility with the first time he came. His wife brought him in that time and she stayed to have a private talk with Frank Martin.

A day and a half after J.P. arrived at the facility, he and the narrator are sitting on the porch and J.P. is telling his story. Frank Martin himself comes out to smoke a cigar. He is a short, heavy-set man who looks like a prizefighter. In his presence, J.P. stops

talking and hunches down in his chair. His behavior surprises the narrator. Frank Martin tells them that Jack London used to live across the valley from the house. He says that Jack London was a better man than any of them was, but he could not fight alcohol and it killed him. He suggests that they read *The Call of the Wild*, which is available at the house, and then he goes inside. J.P. tells the narrator that Frank Martin makes him feel like a bug. He wishes that he had a great name like Jack London instead of the name he has. It has become too cold to sit on the porch, and a bell just rang to announce dinner, so the men go inside.

On the morning of New Year's Eve, the narrator tries to call his wife but does not get an answer. He wants to talk to her about some things he left at her house. He remembers that the last time they spoke on the phone they had a serious argument that ended in name-calling.

Then the narrator describes a resident of the house that he refers to as "the man who travels." The man says his drinking is under control, that he cannot remember coming to Frank Martin's, and that he does not know why he is there. He says anyone can have a blackout and it does not mean anything. He is not a drunk, he says.

Frank Martin prepares a special meal of steaks for New Year's Eve, knowing that this is a difficult time for the residents. The narrator observes that Tiny is not eating much since his seizure and asks if he can have his steak, which Tiny pushes toward him. Tiny is afraid to leave the facility in case he has another seizure. At midnight, Frank Martin brings in a cake with "Happy New Year" written on it in pink frosting. J.P. has two pieces, while the narrator has one piece and saves one for later.

The narrator tries to call his wife again, but there is no answer. He starts to dial his girlfriend's number but decides that he does not want to talk to her. He hopes she is well, but thinks to himself that if she is sick he does not want to know about it.

On New Year's Day, J.P. and the narrator take their coffee out to the porch where the weather is clear and cold. J.P. is waiting for a visit from his wife and says he will introduce her to the narrator. The men are looking toward the hill where Jack London once lived when Roxy drives up the road. When she gets out of the car, the narrator observes that she is a strong, tall and attractive woman, and remembers that she once broke J.P.'s nose. When they meet, he tells her how he heard about how she and J.P. met. She answers that J.P. probably did not tell him everything, like how he was the best chimney sweep in the business. She wants to take J.P. somewhere away from Frank Martin's to talk, but J.P. says he cannot leave, so they start to go inside the house. As they do, the narrator tells Roxy that he needs some luck and asks her to kiss him. She says she is not a chimney sweep anymore, but she kisses him anyway. Then she and J.P. go inside.

The narrator stays on the porch and notices that his hands are shaking now. He admits to himself that he has the shakes and that he wanted a drink that morning when he awoke. He did not tell J.P. about this because he thought it was too depressing. Then he remembers a house where he once lived with his wife. The house did not have a

chimney so he does not know why he remembered it now. One morning he awoke to a scraping noise outside and found that it was his landlord preparing to paint the house. He started early because he wanted to beat the heat. He watched Mr. Venturini, his landlord, from the bedroom for a while before he realized he was standing naked in the window. He remembered how his wife laughed and asked him to come back to bed and how the landlord first just nodded to himself as if he understood the situation, then put on his painter's hat, and climbed his ladder.

The narrator thinks to himself that later in the day he will try to call his wife again and then call his girlfriend. He hopes that her son will not answer the phone. He then tries to remember whether he ever read any Jack London books. He does remember reading a Jack London story called "To Build a Fire." It was about a man who will freeze to death if he does not build a fire to warm himself. The man gets the fire going but then something happens and it goes out. Snow from a branch above falls on it and puts it out. As he thinks about the story, he realizes that it is getting colder on the porch and that night is falling.

He feels the coins in his pocket and decides to try calling his wife again. If she answers, he plans to tell her "Happy New Year" and say nothing else. He will not raise his voice or bring up any problems. He knows she will want to know where he's calling from and that he will have to tell her. He will not talk about New Year's resolutions though. He thinks that after he calls his wife he will also call his girlfriend, or maybe he will call the girlfriend first. He hopes he will not have to talk to her son, and when she answers the phone, he plans just to say, "It's me."

Analysis

The story is divided into nine sections, four of which involve stories or memories about the past, four that describe events in the present, and one in which the narrator discusses both the past and describes the present.

In the first section, the reader is introduced to the two main characters, the narrator and Joe Penny, who wants to be called J.P., and their situation as alcoholics trying to get sober at Frank Martin's rehabilitation facility. Much of the first section comprises the narrator's observation of a man having a seizure from the sudden lack of alcohol in his system. The man had the seizure after he seemed to be recovered, when he was on his way out of the facility to greet a new year at home. This is the first mention of a theme that recurs throughout the story: just when things seem to be going right, something bad happens. This theme is the main reason for the mention of Jack London's story "To Build A Fire" at the end of the story. In this story, a man appears to have saved himself by building a fire only to have snow from a branch above it extinguish it and, with it, all his hopes for survival.

The next section has J.P. describing, first, his experience of falling into a well when he was a child, and second, his meeting with his future wife, Roxy, and his introduction to his life's work of chimney sweeping. The image of being at the bottom of a dry well and

seeing the blue circle of sky above is a powerful metaphor for the entire experience of alcoholism. He calls for help repeatedly, but no one comes until he has accepted where he is and observed how his life has changed, which echoes the requirement for an alcoholic to admit there is a problem before there can be any recovery. He mentions his feeling of dread and the fear that something will fall on him. This reflects the narrator's feeling of doom during his first days in the facility, as well as foreshadowing the idea that something bad will happen just at the moment of salvation.

The metaphor of the well can also be applied to the narrator who repeatedly calls or tries to call for help, specifically from his wife, the person who first helped him with his alcohol problem. J.P.'s description of his meeting with Roxy in the same section draws a parallel with being saved from the well. The focus of her work and J.P.'s, the chimney, represents the opposite of a well. A well goes down into the earth, while a chimney reaches up to the sky. Chimneys and wells have similar shapes, but they are opposites in purpose: one goes down; the other goes up. The well is alcoholism, while the chimney is salvation. J.P. mentions how the blue circle of sky represented hope to him when he was in the well. J.P. sees Roxy, the chimney sweep, as a savior.

In the third section, J.P. describes how he lost everything he had worked for when he began to drink. He becomes violent, fights with Roxy, forces her to have an affair, cuts up her wedding ring, loses his job, is arrested, and finally finds himself at Frank Martin's. This is J.P.'s alcoholic way of sabotaging himself just when he has everything he wants.

The fourth section shows the narrator comparing his experiences in coming to the drying-out facility with J.P.'s and the differences between the first time he came and his current, second visit. These memories and his recollection of J.P. being delivered by Roxy's father and brother describe the variety of ways in which salvation may occur. The wife, the girlfriend, the father-in-law, the brother-in-law, Frank Martin and Roxy all represent means of salvation to the two men who are drunks.

Frank Martin himself makes an appearance in the fifth section as a man who knows what it takes to survive. His recommendation that the men read a Jack London book emphasizes the theme of survival and introduces the limits of self-reliance. He says that Jack London, a "better man" and a survivor in many ways, could not beat alcohol. This is also a foreshadowing of the narrator's memory of "To Build A Fire," a story that describes a man's unsuccessful attempt to save himself. Frank Martin makes J.P. feel like "a bug" because he emphasizes character elements that J.P. feels he lacks. The use of the bug image brings back the story of J.P. in the well where he listened to the rustlings of insects in the dirt above him and worried that they would fall on him.

In the sixth section, the narrator remembers how he and his girlfriend drove up to Frank Martin's, drunk and drinking during the entire journey. This section shows that he is worried about her, but that he does not really want to know if anything is wrong. This echoes back to the narrator's feeling that something is going to happen described in the first section of the story when he wonders about his nervous twitches but does not want to know if he is in danger. His physical twitches are metaphors for his slowly enlarging emotional responses to his wife and girlfriend. This section also describes Frank

Martin's New Year's Eve dinner, which is the celebration of a chance to start over. There is somewhat of a pall on the celebration as symbolized by Tiny, however, who is afraid to start over and who does not join in the celebration after "something happened" to him because of his seizure. Tiny symbolizes the potential for something bad to happen every time the alcoholics see a glimmer of hope.

The eighth section of the story combines actions in the present on New Year's Day and the narrator's memories of a house he and his wife once inhabited. This is also the section where the narrator hopes to claim some of J.P.'s potential salvation by asking Roxy to bring him luck by kissing him. The narrator wants someone to save him from himself, and after Roxy does kiss him, he feels better. She has "thrown him a rope" in his well of despair. His memory of standing naked at the window of house while the landlord climbs a ladder represents a resurrection, starting over, the New Year and climbing out of his depression.

At the end of the story, the narrator has decided to call his wife and his girlfriend. He acknowledges that he will have to explain himself to his wife. When he calls her he will have to tell her he is at Frank Martin's, that he is back "in the well" and is asking her to save him again. When he calls his girlfriend, however, he will only have to identify himself because he knows she understands pain and despair due to her experience of health problems. There is a hint of the "wounded healer" concept in the narrator turning to the girlfriend rather than his wife, but there is also the notion that he may be sabotaging himself again by avoiding the one person who might really save him. His thoughts about "To Build A Fire" show that this may be the case. Even now, that he has acknowledged he is in trouble by admitting to wanting a drink, he is thinking about this story where a freezing man dies because the efforts he makes are insufficient in a cold world.

A notable element of the story is that few of the characters have names. The narrator's wife, his girlfriend, the girlfriend's son, J.P.'s friend, the "man who travels," and the narrator himself, none of them has names, indicating that they are not important to the narrator. Only those with something to teach him have names: Frank Martin, Tiny, Roxy, Jack London, Mr. Venturini. J.P. hates his name and wants to be known by his initials only, showing that he is unready to take on the role of a teacher despite the narrator's encouragement to share his story and example.

Another important feature is the use of imagery that echoes Jack London's works. The increasing cold that surrounds the two men on the porch, chimneys and the coal bucket to emphasize the idea of fire, and the idea that something will always happen to disturb efforts at survival. The use of the *Call of the Wild* as an encouragement to the men to be strong is trumped by the use of "To Build A Fire" and its emphasis on defeat. The reader is left to wonder why Frank Martin told the men that Jack London, "a better man," was ultimately defeated by alcohol.

Characters

Frank Martin

Frank Martin is the proprietor of a residential treatment facility for alcoholics. A short, heavy-set, cigar-smoking man, he advises his patients to consider the example of Jack London, the famous writer who died of alcoholism. His rather "macho" approach seems simplistic in the context of the complex human problems J.P. and the narrator have been discussing.

Narrator

The unnamed narrator of the story is an alcoholic, probably in his late thirties or early forties, who has checked into a residential treatment facility for the second time. He is estranged from his wIfe and seems unable to cope with the news that his girlfriend may have cancer. Sitting on the facility's front porch, the narrator listens to a fellow patient named J.P. describe his own turbulent marriage. The narrator seems genuinely touched by J.P. and by his wife, Roxy, when she comes to visit. Seeing the warmth of this couple's interaction, the narrator is motivated to reach out to his own wife and to his girlfriend. It is uncertain whether the narrator will ever overcome his alcoholism or establish healthy emotional bonds with the women in his life There may be some hope in the story's open-ended closing, however, as the narrator imagines the warm greetings he will offer if he does manage to reach either his wife or his girlfriend on the telephone.

Joe Penny

J.P. is an alcoholic in his thirties on his first stay at a residential treatment facility. Sitting on the front porch with the narrator, J.P shares his anxieties and much of his life story. He was married at a fairly young age to a woman named Roxy and became a partner in her family's chimney-cleaning business. As his drinking escalated, so did his violent fights with Roxy. After losing control upon discovering that his wife was having an affair, he allowed his wife's father and brother to bring him to the treatment center. J.P.'s openness with the narrator, as well as the warmth he shares with his wife when she comes to visit, seems to touch and inspire the narrator in new ways.

J.P.

See Joe Penny

Roxy

Roxy, J.P.'s wife, is a generous and earthy woman who shows support for her husband despite the far-from-ideal history of their relationship. She strikes the narrator as "a tall, good-looking woman . .. who can make fists If she has to." She is evidently strong enough to hold her own in physical brawls with her husband, and passionate enough to conduct an extramarital affair when her husband's drinking comes between them. She is also forgiving enough to embrace her husband again when she visits him at the treatment facility.

Tiny

Tiny is another alcoholic patient at the treatment facility. "A big, fat guy... from Santa Rosa," Tiny is outgoing, jovial, and confident in his belief that he will be back home with his family before New Year's Eve. However, a horrifying seizure one morning abruptly puts an end to these plans and greatly disturbs his self-confidence.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

In a review of *Cathedral* for the *New York Times Book Review,* Irving Howe identified an important theme in Carver's work when he called the collection "stories of our loneliness." The setting for "Where I'm Calling From" is a "drying out facility," which is by design a place of Isolation. Its residents are deliberately kept apart from family, friends, and society as a part of their cure. Yet, the characters have been plagued by an inability to connect with others since long before they checked into the facility. Both the narrator and J.P., for example, come to the facility from faded or failing marriages. The narrator's current relationship with his girlfriend seems to have suffered a complete breakdown in communication: neither has called the other since she dropped him off at the facility, and the narrator admits that he does not want to hear whether she has received any bad news regarding her medical tests. Perhaps most alienated of all is the patient who denies being an alcoholic, even though he is unable to remember how he arrived at the facility. The narrator refers to him as "a guy who travels," and though his business takes him all over the world, the man is out of touch with the reality of his situation and seemingly without a home.

Friendship and Intimacy

The phone calls that the narrator never quite succeeds in making to his wife and girlfriend symbolize his loneliness and Isolation. At the same time, they also reflect his fundamental need for connection to others. Interwoven throughout the story's portrayal of lonely, isolated men are parallel themes of friendship and intimacy-perhaps best Illustrated by the relationship between J.P. and the narrator. J.P. displays a natural tendency to seek intimacy. He reaches out to Roxy, for example, asking for a kiss almost as soon as he meets her. Sitting on the porch with the narrator, J.P. has a need to communicate and to share information about himself. The history of the narrator's relationships suggests that intimacy and friendship do not come easily to him, but J.P. calls him "friend" or "pal" three times during Roxy's visit near the end of the story. He begins listening to J.P. mostly out of a desire to be distracted from his own worries, but in the end J.P.'s story seems to help the narrator become more clearly aware of himself and his problems. He is inspired to reach out-first by asking Roxy for a kiss, and then in a more important and challenging way-by calling his wife and girlfriend.

Identity and the Search For Self

As much as "Where I'm Calling From" is about the narrator acknowledging his need for others, It is also about turning inward and searching for one's own Identity. Two of the other patients at the facility are presented as cautionary examples of what happens without sufficient self-awareness. Tiny, the jolly "fat guy" from Santa Rosa, prematurely

believes himself to be ready to go home to his family on New Year's Eve. When his sudden and terrifying seizure exposes his repressed vulnerability, he becomes feeble and depressed-"not the same old Tiny." The "guy who travels" denies the obvious fact that he is an alcoholic. He verges on paranoia as he worries that being accused of alcoholism might "ruin a good man's prospects," and when he insists that his blackouts are caused by the ice "they put into your drink."

The question of identity is raised in a sarcastic way by the narrator's girlfriend when she first drops him off at the treatment facility. "Guess who's here," she says. Becoming more aware of who he is, it turns out, may be an important key to the narrator's recovery. Toward the end of the story, while thinking about what J.P. has told him, the narrator recalls an event from his own past. The memory, an embarrassing but minor incident in front of a new landlord, includes a significant moment of contentedness: "And a wave of happiness comes over me that I'm not him-that I'm me and that I'm inside this bedroom with my wife." The story ends as the narrator, perhaps hoping to recover some of that lost happiness, plans to call his wife and girlfriend simply to present himself as straightforwardly as he can. He is not sure what to say to these women If and when he reaches them, other than being honest (at least to his wIfe) about "where [he's] calling from."

Style

Point of View and Narration

"Where I'm Calling From" is told in the first person by an unnamed narrator. The present tense is used almost exclusively, even in scenes that are memories or accounts of earlier events. The narrator tends to be blunt, Informal, and brief. In the first paragraph, for example, he describes J.P. as "first and foremost a drunk." He frequently uses run-on sentences and sentence fragments, as in the description of one of the worst fights between J.P. and Roxy: "He manages to get Roxy' s wedding ring off her finger. And when he does, he cuts it into several pieces with a pair of wire-cutters. Good, solid fun."

Most of the narration consists of matter-of-fact physical description, rarely offering analysis of motivation or psychological states beyond simple statements like "he's scared." Whether out of inarticulateness or a lack of insight, the narrator seems at a loss to explain his drinking problem or the reason for his return to the treatment facility for a second time: "What's to say? I'm back." Similarly, he wonders "who knows why we do what we do?" in retelling the story of the escalation of J.P.'s drinking. This "surface-only" approach invites readers to playa more active and creative role, leaving them to make their own deductions about the internal workings of the characters.

Setting and Narrative Structure

The principal setting of the story-the porch of the treatment facility-is used as a kind of narrative frame. The story begins and ends there; in between, stories-within-the-story describe events out of chronological sequence. The stories J.P. tells are presented, for the most part, as paraphrased by the unnamed narrator rather than as direct quotations of J.P.'s words. This filtering tactic keeps the story focused on the narrator and encourages readers to see the impact which J.P. has on the narrator. Carver also seems to use the setting of the porch to reflect certain aspects of the characters' lives. At one point, a bank of clouds on the horizon visible from the porch seems to mirror the impending doom in the story J.P. is telling. Sitting on the porch, the narrator and J P are also on another kind of threshold: a turning point in their relationships with others and in their struggles with alcoholism. The prospects they face seem very much like a choice between retreating inside-back into the relative warmth of the bottle-or venturing forth into the chilly unknown to mend their shattered lives.

Allusion

One of the most interesting and subtle aspects of the story is Carver's use of allusion to illuminate characters and events. The proprietor of the treatment facility makes a reference to the famous writer Jack London and his book *The Call of the Wild.* Associated with an outlook of "rugged individualism," London wrote adventure stones that described heroic men struggling alone in the wilderness. The concept of "making it

on one's own" Implied by the proprietor's reference stands in contrast to the more collaborative form of healing taking place between the narrator and J.P. The narrator thinks of Jack London again at the end of the story, as he recalls a London story he once read about a man struggling to survive in an arctic environment. (The story is called "To Build a Fire.") Remembering that the man in the story ends by dying alone, the narrator decides that his own survival in the cold world outside the treatment facility will depend on his ability to connect with others.

Other, less explicit references to various aspects of popular culture are scattered throughout the story, helping to convey the atmosphere of boredom and banality in which the characters live. Television is almost omnipresent: residents at the treatment facility look up from the television when a new patient arrives, J.P. and Roxy drink in front of their television, and the narrator imagines that he and his girlfriend are watching the same TV show when he decides not to finish dialing her number. The narrator also mentions the annual New Year's Eve broadcast from Times Square, which he is watching with his fellow patients. Critic Randolph Paul Runyon has even argued that the story contains allusions to other stories written by Carver, pointing to a number of similarities between the narrator and the main character of the story immediately preceding "Where I'm Calling From" in the collection *Cathedral.* Carver's borrowing from diverse aspects of American life invites readers to draw connections between the story and whatever personal or cultural experiences they find meaningful.

Historical Context

Reagan Era Pageantry and Polarization

Many people have interpreted the early 1980s as an unusually image-conscious era In the United States. After the election of former movie star and California governor Ronald Reagan as president, the elaborate black-tie festivities surrounding his inauguration in January, 1981, were watched with fascination on televisions around the country. Reagan's inauguration served as an important symbol to many, representing sweeping changes promised by the new conservative Republican leader and ushering in a new era of prosperity. The previous president, Jimmy Carter-who had worn a plain business suit to his inauguration-had tried to project a more down-to-earth image. Many felt that the country's prestige had been diminished in recent years, and Carter's popularity had waned especially in the preceding 14 months, during which 53 Americans had been held hostage by Islamic fundamentalists in Teheran, Iran. On the very day of Reagan's inauguration, the hostages were released and images of Iranians holding Americans at gunpoint finally disappeared from nightly news broadcasts. Given the disastrous American economy under Carter, as well as his poor performance during a debate with Reagan shortly before the 1980 election and the latter's genial optimism about the abilities of the American people to accomplish great things (contrasted with Carter's gloomy public assertion that the American people suffered from spiritual malaise), it was not surprising that Reagan won the election handily.

The patriotic makeover Reagan offered, however, was at odds with other people's images of the country, especially among the president's many partisan critics in the broadcast media. By November of 1982, in part because of poor decisions enacted at the Federal Reserve, unemployment reached 10.8 percent, its highest rate since 1940. The number of people living below the poverty line was the highest in 17 years. Many women and minorities claimed to feel excluded from Reagan's vision, which harkened back to a perhaps-romanticized past-especially when he proposed cutting funding for federal programs from which they benefited. Members of the gay community, which was being ravaged by the deadly new AIDS epidemic, felt overlooked by the Reagan Administration as they pleaded for more research and education about the disease. Although Reagan consistently did well in public opinion polls, he also had many vocal critics who felt that his policies glossed over-and even exacerbated-a growing list of social Ills in America, including homelessness, drug abuse, violent crime, pollution, educational underachievement, and income disparity. For his part, Reagan believed that all these problems were essentially "private sector" issues, related to personal choices (moral, spiritual, and relational), private association, family life, and small-business endeavor, areas in which federal "assistance" was irrelevant and inappropriate.

Just Say No

Reagan, along with his wife Nancy, soon chose to focus special attention on the growing problem of drug abuse. Crack, a highly addictive, relatively inexpensive crystallized form of cocaine that could be smoked, was opening new mass markets among young people, particularly in poor urban neighborhoods. As crack was tied to increasing violent crime, disintegration of families and communities, and proliferating health emergencies, President Reagan announced a "war on drugs" in October, 1982. Shortly thereafter, Nancy Reagan began a media campaign to combat drug use, adopting the slogan "Just Say No ".

These efforts had many critics, including those who argued that the First Lady was only trying to improve her image. Nonetheless, in the early 1980s a number of drug abuse prevention movements gained momentum. Though the overall rate at which young people used drugs continued to rise until the 1990s, there were small signs of progress. Treatment programs, many based on the twelve-step approach developed by Alcoholics Anonymous, reported increased enrollment and improved recovery rates. Among the most successful anti-drug efforts in the 1980s were those aimed at raising awareness about alcohol as an addictive drug and preventing drunk driving. MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) was founded in 1980 by a small group of women in California after a 13-year-old girl was killed in an accident caused by a drunk driver. By the end of the decade, MADD had grown into a large national organization with nearly 600 local chapters. Working to raise public awareness and lobbying for stiffer penalties for driving under the influence of alcohol, the agency played a leading role in reducing alcohol-related accidents and helped to slow the escalation of teenage drinking.

Reading and the Arts In the "Information Age"

As personal computers became common household and office equipment, some observers announced the arrival of a new "Information Age" Schools began to include more computer classes in

their curricula to better prepare young people to compete in a new information-based global economy. Fundamental changes did occur in the way Americans obtained news and information, but critics charged that in some ways information was becoming less accessible, not more. Local newspapers, once the country's primary source for news, were losing in their competition with television news. Many folded or were purchased by national chains. On September *15,* 1982, the Gannett newspaper chain began publishing *USA Today.* Keeping stories brief and making more use of color, the new national daily almost instantly won a huge readership, placing even more pressure on local independent newspapers.

Commentators of diverse political persuasions pointed fingers at each other in assigning blame for declining literacy rates in America's schools. In his controversial 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind,* conservative scholar Allan Bloom accused liberals of "dumbing down" America in the name of equality. Liberal thinkers like Marian Wright

Edelman blamed Reagan administration "cutbacks" in public school funding and neglect of students from poor neighborhoods for the declining test scores. Similar disputes arouse in the arts world, which was increasingly criticized for its insularity and for being out of touch with the mainstream. Controversial artists-like performance artist Karen Finley, whose work many people considered obscene, or at least unworthy of taxpayer support were threatened with the possibility of being denied the government grants on which they depended

In the literary world, a group of authors that included Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, Tobias Wolff and others, began using more traditional, realistic techniques in their writing. Their stories, appearing in a handful of long-established magazines like the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic Monthly,* began to reach a wider audience than most serious literature had in recent years. Their understated and accessible approach to writing stood in contrast to that of the previous generation of postmodernist writers, who were known for extravagantly experimental works that were long and hard to understand. The new writers shared an interest in depicting the lives of contemporary "ordinary" people, often in identifiable regional settings within the United States. Because these writers tried to avoid intrusive storytelling gimmicks and made an effort to use language as efficiently as possible, they came to be known as minimalists.

Critical Overview

Carver was already considered one of America's premier short story writers when "Where I'm Calling From" was first published, in the *New Yorker* in 1982. The story was chosen for inclusion in the *Best American Short Stories,* 1983 published by Houghton Mifflin. Carver's story "Cathedral" had been chosen for the preceding year's edition. Both of these stories were a part of Carver's 1983 collection entitled *Cathedral,* which was nominated for both a National Book Critics' Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize.

Carver's work, however, has not been without controversy. Many Critics believed that Carveralong with other minimalist writers-were outmoded in their realism and simplistic in their characterizations. James Atlas, for example, wrote in the *Atlantic* that he found Carver's prose "so aggressive in the suppression of detail that one is left with a hunger for richness, texture, excess." Minimalists' work in general has suffered under a long list of unflattering labels, including "K-Mart realism," "hick chic," "TV fiction," and "lo-cal literature." The avant-garde postmodernist writer John Barth even suggested in a *New York Times Book Review* article that the popularity of the minimalists was actually due to the declining literacy levels of the American public. Critic Charles Newman, writing ill the journal *Salmagundi,* went so far as to describe minimalists' work as "the classic conservative response to inflation-under-utilization of capacity, reduction of inventory and verbal joblessness." In an otherwise negative review of *Cathedral,* in the *Hudson Review,* Michael Gorra praised "Where I'm Calling From": "It is easily the best story of this collection, and makes me think that if he confronted his subject he might in fact manage to turn the alcoholic into Everyman."

Probably the most prominent early defender of the new generation of Writers was Carver's former professor and mentor, novelist John Gardner. For Gardner, the trend toward realism ill fiction, after a generation of postmodernist experimentation with narrative forms, was a return to a kind of literary "morality." Gardner saw the minimalists as part of an inevitable cycle in the progress of cultural development. As he wrote in his landmark 1978 book *On Moral Fiction,* "Art rediscovers, generation by generation what is necessary to humanness." Another influential critical assessment appeared ill the *Mississippi Review* in 1985, ill a special issue devoted entirely to the new American minimalists. In his introductory commentary, guest editor Kim Herzinger argued that minimalism was a continuation of postmodernist ideas about language and narrative form, rather than a rejection of them. He also pointed to several crucial distinctions between the minimalists' work and traditional realism, including the minimalists' "distaste for irony" (i.e., the distance between the implicit viewpoint of the author and that of the characters) and their refusal to define characters through location and setting.

When Carver's collection *Cathedral* appeared, initial reviewers noted a new direction in Carver's work. In his previous stories-most of which were collected in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* (1976) and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981)-he had seemed to be condensing his writing, paring down the narrative structures of his stories to their barest essentials. His characters lived unremittingly bleak and spiritually barren lives. In *Cathedral,* critics saw a change in Carver's work" an increase in vitality,"

as Anatole Broyard described it in the *New York Times Book Review,* Also writing ill the *New York Times,* reviewer Irving Howe noted "a greater ease of manner and generosity of feeling," and compared Carver's work to that of painter Edward Hopper ill his effort to explore "the far side of the ordinary."

By the time of Carver's death in 1988, he had won a large array of critical honors and secured his influence on American literature. Since then, biographers have examined the relationship between his life and work, and a number of book-length studies of his writings have been published. Most have taken Herzinger's approach and placed Carver in a continuing postmodernist tradition. In 1992, for example, Randolph Paul Runyon's *Reading Raymond Carver* examines Carver's use of repeated motifs and references to his own stories, suggesting that "Carver is in fact a self-reflexive meta-fictional writer." Kirk Nesset's 1995 study, *The Stories of Raymond Carver,* gives a very thorough "full-scale critical investigation" of all Carver's major prose works, including an examination of themes of "insularity and self-enlargement" in the stories included in *Cathedral.*

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Sonkowsky has taught college English and written on a wide range of topics in education. He is currently involved in the creation of alternative educational programs that take an intergenerational approach to learning. In the following essay, he examines images of supportive older men in "Where I'm Calling From" and discusses their implications about the role of father figures in personal growth and development.

We feel one thing one minute,
something else the next.
-Raymond Carver, from a poem entitled
"Romanticism' ,

The stories in Raymond Carver's 1983 *Cathedral* collection include possibilities for characters' growth and development not found in his earlier stories. Carver commented in interviews that he was aware of something "totally different" about the stories as he was writing them-something which, as he put it, "reflects a change in my life." Reflections of two of the biggest changes in the author's life-quitting drinking in 1977 and sharing a home with writer Tess Gallagher since 1979-can certainly be found in "Where I'm Calling From." The story concerns an alcoholic narrator who befriends a fellow alcoholic named J.P. at a treatment center they have both checked into. Much of the hope for change in the lives of the two main characters seems to lie in establishing better relations with women: at the story's end, J.P is embraced by his WIfe and the narrator resolves to call his wife and his girlfriend.

For the most part, however, women in "Where I'm Calling From" remain off stage. The story's setting, "Frank Martin's drying out facility," is a decidedly male place. "Just about everyone at Frank Martin's has nicks on his face," as the narrator points out, from shaving A key to understanding the characters' potential for growth lies in the images of helpful-or potentially helpful-older men that appear throughout the story Carver presents a series of interactions between males of different ages that depict personal transformations m various ways and seem to hint at the importance of father-like figures.

J P. begins his communication with the narrator by sharing a boyhood memory of falling down a dry well and being rescued by his father. The most vivid aspect of the memory seems to be the fear and sense of isolation J.P. experiences looking up from where he landed: "In short, everything about his life was different for him at the bottom of that well." It is easy to imagine that J.P.'s reminiscence has been triggered by the parallels between the bottom of that well and his current situation-isolated from loved ones, in another "dry" place, after having "hit bottom," looking out at a midday sky from the porch. The memory of being rescued by his father, then, *comes* as a kind of infantile w1sh, a fantasy of the personal transformation which both J.P. and the narrator want to undergo.

J.P. is brought to Frank Martin's at a point when he has started falling again-falling off roofs while drunk at work. It 1S interesting to note that he is handed over to Frank Martin's care by male escorts, his father-in-law and brother-in-law, and that "the old guy signed him in." Frank Martin, however, proves to be a much less nurturing substitute father. The proprietor of this treatment facility for men exhibits exaggerated masculine characteristics: he is physically large, smokes cigars, and stands "like a prizefighter." In an abrupt "sermon," he advises J.P. and the narrator to consider the famous writer Jack London, who, though "a better man than any of us," died of alcoholism. The "rugged individualist" model of manhood embodied by Jack London's adventure tales-and by the brusque Frank Martin-does seem deadly to J.P. and the narrator, who are more in need of support from others. In J.P.'s ch1ldhood memory, his father rescues him from a hole where young J.P. "was thinking of insects"; Frank Martin's effect on J.P. is only to make him "feel like a bug."

Toward the end of the story, the narrator experiences a flash of memory and has a hard time explaining its trigger: he suggests that maybe J.P. the chimney sweep reminded him of a house in which he used to live, but then dismisses the notion, adding "That house didn't have a chimney." A

more likely explanation concerns the "old guy" at the center of the memory. The narrator remembers getting out of bed with his wife to investigate a noise that had awakened them early one morning and encountering his landlord, who had come to paint the house. Staring through a window at the old man, the narrator experiences a moment of unusual contentedness: "Goddamn it, I think, if he isn't a weird old fellow. And a wave of happiness *comes* over me that I'm not him-that I'm me and that I'm ins1de this bedroom with my wife." The encounter ends as the narrator notices that he had forgotten to put on a robe before opening the window curtain and that the landlord could see his nakedness. Returning to his wife in bed, the narrator imagines the old man saying, in fatherly fashion, "Go on, sonny, *go* on back to bed. I understand." In the closing image of narrator's memory, the old man "starts climbing the ladder," moving upward

The memory of encountering this "weird old fellow" appears to be the narrator's fantasy about the personal transformation he needs to undergo in order to recover any happiness. For J.P., being rescued by his father meant being transported from where "everything" 1S "different" to "back in the world he'd always lived in." For the narrator, the sight of his landlord somehow brings him back to himself-back to being happy with his own identity. The "old fart" outside his window reveals something to the narrator about himself in a way that his wife cannot. It makes sense, of course, for older men to embody growth and development for a male narrator and a male writer: an older man is what a younger man will become. The narrator's landlord appears to understand because as an older person he has perhaps experienced aspects of life the narrator is currently experiencing. Looking at the old man through his window, the narrator is getting a glimpse of himself.

The narrator has been cast as the older man all along, since introducing J.P. in the story's first paragraph: "He is about 30 years old. Younger than I. Not much younger, but a little." The narrator's treatment begins as he conceals his own fears and adopts the

role of the more experienced protector of J P., reassuring him that "the shakes will idle down" and encouraging him to talk. The final step in recovery, which both J.P. and the narrator have yet to take, may be acknowledging their own roles as father figures. J.P. will eventually have to confront the children he forbids his wife to bring along on her visit to Frank Martin's The narrator, by the same token, will have to be ready to talk to his girlfriend's "mouthy kid" if he is the one who answers the phone.

When J.P. and the narrator reach that point, at which they can talk to the women and children in their lives without rage and can "stay dry" (like the unfortunate man in the London short story cited by the narrator) on a long-term basis, they will be ready to assume their place as fathers and protectors in the world.

Source: Michael Sonkowsky, "Grown Men III 'Where I'm Calling From' ," for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Haslam compares the original story, published in the New Yorker, *to the version published in Carver's collection* Where I'm Calling From.

Raymond Carver liked to revise his stories He won critical acclaim from reviewers and academics alike for rewriting "The Bath" from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) into "A Small, Good Thing" for *Cathedral* (1983), and he published in *Fires* (1984) a selection of revised stories as well as an essay on his practice. It is hardly surprising that there are three published versions of Carver's "Where I'm Calling From." The story initially appeared in the *New Yorker* (15 March 1982); it was significantly revised for Carver's highly praised *Cathedral;* and, With a few slight changes, was reprinted in his new and collected stories, *Where I'm Calling From* (1989) There are substantial differences between the first and last published versions of the story. These revisions-not all of which are Improvements-are also a sort of commentary, providing both new matter and means for a Critical appreciation of "Where I'm Calling From" Reading both story versions for their strengths and weaknesses, I comment on five key differences between *New Yorker* text and the *Where I'm Calling From* text. In doing so, I hope to foreground (and later argue for) Carver's understanding of people as intrinsic story-tellers, as dialogic selves who find their meaning, value and identity through and by interaction with other selves, other stories. Of course, the textual findings I present are better understood as illustrating rather than proving my basic claim about Carver and the narrative self.

The first difference between the two story versions concerns the narrator's description of a rival for his girlfriend's attention and affection. The *New Yorker* text reads:

She tried to explain to her son that she was going to be gone that afternoon and evening, and he'd have to get his own dinner But right as we were going out the door this Goddamned kid screamed at us. He screamed, "You call this love? The hell with you both' I hope you never come back. I hope you kill yourselves!" Imagine this kid!

The revised *Where I'm Calling From* text reads:

She tried to explain to her kid that she was going to be gone for a while and he'd have to get his own food.
But right as we were going out the door, this mouthy kid screamed at us. He screamed, "The hell with you both! I hope you never come back I hope you kill yourselves'" Imagine this kid!

The final version is less blatant, but subtlety is not the highest virtue. In favor of the *New Yorker* text, the "Goddamned" Oedipal "son" carries more weight than the revised gender-neutral "mouthy kid"; and positioned as the narrator's male rival, the teenaged son provides both a moral and practical reference lacking from the revised version. His parting shot-"You call this love? To hell with you both"-condemns his mother and the narrator for their bleak, clearly dysfunctional relationship centered on alcohol abuse,

careless-rather than casual-sex, and a shared indifference that seems more like mutual contempt. In favor of the final version, however, the changes from "that afternoon and evening" to "a while" and from "dinner" to "food" brilliantly underscore the chaotic and harmful aspects of the lovers' relationship: the kid is left to fend for himself-and not just miss dinner-for an indefinite period as his mother disappears With her boyfriend into the void.

The second difference between the two story versions concerns the narrator's drinking blow-out just before checking into Frank Martin's treatment center. In the *New Yorker* text, the narrator recalls: "I didn't eat anything except cashew nuts"; and "I bought us three bottles of champagne. Quality stuff-Piper." In the final version these descriptive details are effaced: "I didn't eat anything but salted nuts"; and "I bought us the champagne." The deletion of these details, the champagne brand and type of snack, seem trivial. But an alcoholic narrator in quest of recovery, telling his own story the best he can, might find a curious importance in recollecting and reconstructing the contingencies of his experience. In comparison with the *New Yorker* narrator, the *Where I'm Calling From* narrator lacks memory and seems flatter and less colorful.

Less is not always more. The third difference brings this into relief for higher stakes. In describing himself and J.P. leaving the porch, the *New Yorker* narrator comments:

J P and I get out of our chairs slowly, like old geezers, and we go inside its startlng to get too cold on the porch anyway. We can see our breath drifting out from us as we talk.

This, in the first published version, is a moment of subdued but powerful insight. Due to their excessive alcohol abuse, J.P. and the narrator are prematurely (although perhaps only temporarily) "like old geezers"; and sitting together on the porch, they watch their breath-archetypally, their life-force or souls-drifting out or dissipating as death approaches. The final version all but annuls this moment, since the clause "like old geezers" has been deleted (otherwise the narrator's description' reads exactly the same).

There are yet further consequences to Carver's deletion of a mere three words. In the *New Yorker* text, the narrator's self-depiction as an "old geezer" sets up a dialectic with his later reflection on the "old duffer" Mr. Venturini, his former landlord. The narrator recalls his thoughts when disturbed early one morning by Mr. Venturini painting the outside of the house:

God damn it, I think, if he isn't a weird old hombre, then I've never seen one. And at that minute a wave of happiness comes over me that I'm not him-that I'm me and that I'm inside this bedroom with my wife.

This memory gains significance through the narrator's realization that he, a dispossessed and virtual" old geezer," is presently in far worse shape than Mr. Venturini, and yet may still have a chance to regain some of his former happiness and stability. Inspired by his recollection of a better time, the narrator tentatively plans a comeback:

Maybe later this afternoon I'll try calling my wife again. And then I'll call to see what's happening with my girlfriend.

These reverberations are missing from the *Where I'm Calling From* text, since there is no interplay between the narrator's earlier insight into his own condition and his later recollection of Mr. Venturini. Also, the *New Yorker* descriptions of Mr. Venturini as an "old duffer" and "a weird old hombre" are changed in the final version to the more mundane "old guy" and "weird old fellow."

The fourth difference results from Carver's most extensive revision. In the *New Yorker* text, Frank Martin encounters J.P. and the narrator sitting on the porch and offers them a sermon about real men and the need to reach out:

"Jack London used to have a big place on the other side of the valley. Right over there behind that green hill you're looking at. But alcohol killed him. Let that be a lesson. He was a better man than any of us. But he couldn't handle the stuff, either. You guys want to read something while you're here, read that book of his *The Call of the Wild* You know the one I'm talking about? We have it inside, If you want to read something It's about this animal that's half dog and half wolf. They don't write books like that anymore. But we could have helped Jack London, If we'd been here in those days. And if he'd let us. If he' d asked for our help Hear me? Like we can help you If you ask for it and if you listen End of sermon But don't forget It. If," he says again. Then he hitches his pants and tugs his sweater down "I'm going inside," he says. "See you at lunch"

In the final version, a less pontifical Frank states:

"Jack London used to have a big place on the other side of the valley Right over there behind that green hill you're looking at. But alcohol killed him. Let that be a lesson to you. He was a better man than any of us. But he couldn't handle the stuff, either. You guys want to read something while you're here, read that book of his, *The Call of the Wild* You know the one I'm talking about? We have It inside If you want to read something. It's about this animal that's half dog and half wolf. End of sermon," he says, and then hitches his pants up and tugs his sweater down "I'm going inside," he says. "See you at lunch"

The *Where I'm Calling From* sermon strikes me as far superior. It makes little sense for Frank, as he does in the *New Yorker* version, to weaken his case by belatedly reclaiming Jack London. It is the dismal death of Jack, "a better man than any of us," that drives home Frank's point that alcohol abuse kills, and kills regardless of machismo or merit. Otherwise laconic with the deportment of "a prize fighter, like somebody who knows the score," Frank in either version seems not the type to cant repetitious "if, if, if" verbiage to men who know better.

For similar reasons, I think the revised characterization of Frank is superior as well. In the *New Yorker* version, Frank diminishes in stature by prissily prattling grandiose. Talkiness bleeds authority. In the revised version, Frank remains in character as a tough, shrewd handler of men. Indeed, after smacking the narrator and J.P. on the head

with Jack London as an object lesson, the revised Frank proffers them a vicarious thrill of positive reinforcement to let them know that it is their behavior-and not them-that is bad. First the stick and then the suggestion of a carrot: a good way to deal with naughty boys and men. The *New Yorker* text is painfully heavy-handed; the *Where I'm Calling From* text, direct and assured.

The fifth difference between the two versions-and arguably Carver's best revision to the story- concerns the narrator's encounter with J.P.'s wife, Roxy. The *New Yorker* text reads:

He's embarrassed, too. I'm embarrassed But I keep looking at her Roxy doesn't know what to make of It She grins. "I'm not a sweep anymore," she says. "Not for years. Didn't Joe tell you? What the hell. Sure, I'll kiss you. Sure for luck."

Some of the narrator's comments are superfluous. It is obvious, for example, from the way the incident is described and framed that he and J.P. are embarrassed. The slimmer and trimmer *Where I'm Calling From* text reads:

But I keep looking at her Roxy grins. "I'm not a sweep anymore," she says. "Not for years. Didn't Joe tell you that? But sure, I'll lass you, sure."

In favor of the final version, the rev1sed Roxy 1S stronger and sharper, more in character as the "tall, good-looking woman" who deeply loves J.P. and yet "can make fists 1f she has to." The revision also emphasizes Roxy's kiss as an act of deliberate compassion and not-unlike the *New Yorker* version-a "what the hell" lark. In both texts, Roxy's last words to the narrator are "Good luck" ; in the final version, her single anointment of good fortune is more poignant and powerful. Given the quality of Carver's revisions concerning Roxy and Frank Martin, I moderately favor the *Where I'm Calling From* text over the *New Yorker* text. No doubt one could reach a different judgment based on the same revisions. More 1mportantly, I think that the differences in question bring into relief the complex interplay of desire, memory, and dialogue that distingn1shes Carver's view of the narrative self. The best example of th1S interplay seems to me the turning point common to both versions of the story, the narrator's flirtation with Roxy. It is the narrator's desire for Roxy, and the kiss she gives him in turn that cause him to reflect on his own history of relationships. His recapitulation of the past is both a recovery and a reweaving of the self. A person, Caroline Whitbeck argues, should be understood

as a relational and historical being. One becomes a person in and through relationships With other people; being a person requires that one have a history of relationships With other people, and the realization of the self can be achieved only in and through relationships and practices.

Relationships and practices are made poss1ble and realized, of course, through and within the inter-subjective means of language. That is why to recover himself, to tell his story, the narrator must engage in a dialogue W1th others-he must rejoin the larger society from which he has been alienated.

In short, he must resume a normal life. The narrator considers doing Just that at the story's end as he tentatively plans to call either his wife, girlfriend, or both.

But "dialogue" is easy to say and quite often difficult to achieve. We speak because we desire and lack; our conversations are a form of commerce; and yet our "dialogues" may oscillate from automatic and impersonal exchanges to colliding and conflict-ridden soliloquies. Likewise, the soC1al practices and values that define and maintain normality work as well to define and police-and thus in a very different way to maintain-abnormality What you are able to say and do, what dialogues you can engage in, very much depend on your pos1tion as a social subject: where you are calling from I think that Carver's story explores rather than resolves these concerns, Since the closure to "Where I'm Calling From" is problematized and deferred in two fairly distinct ways. Although these two demarcations will always overlap, Carver uses ordinary and literary language to necessitate the reader's collaboration.

By ordinary language I mean, simply enough, a fairly literal reading of the narrator's final statements He intends "maybe later this afternoon" to call his wife. He would like to call his girlfriend but does not "want to get her mouthy son on the line."

Reflecting for a moment on Frank Martin's earlier sermon about Jack London and the need that even real men occasionally have for help, the narrator thinks about the one London story he knows, "To Build a Fire," in which the rugged individual alone in the wilderness freezes to death. Graced with sudden insight, the narrator yet again decides to "try his wife first"; but after considering what she might say, he thinks about calling his girlfriend first. Once more, however, he pauses at the specter of her son answering the phone. These hesitations and reversals show that the narrator does not quite know what he wants or what he will do. As readers, we do not quite know either.

Nor do we obtain a resolution beyond the "surface" of the narrator's final remarks. The literary language, and by that I mean the recognizable use of such conventions as allusion and enplotment, works against closure. More simply and specifically, the narrator's reflective summary of Jack London's "To Build a Fire" is not fortuitous. The story offers an ironic parallel to his own:

This guy in the Yukon is freezing Imagine it-he's actually going to freeze in death if he can't get a fire going. With a fire he can dry his socks and clothing and warm himself he gets his fire going, but then something happens to it. A branchful of snow drops on it. It goes out meanwhile, the temperature is falling. Night is coming on.

The narrator, too, is trying to build a fire. Like the protagonist in London's story, who, after a few desperate efforts, seems to have triumphed against dire odds, the narrator makes some false starts as well-the two failed attempts to call his wife on New Year's Eve. If he successfully reaches his wife or girlfriend this time around, and this we as readers will never know, we are still left wondering whether all his efforts-like those of London's protagonist-will come to nothing. The narration ends in anticipation of a yet-to-be realized event. The story achieves resolution-if at all-through the imposition of our expectations and desires.

In stressing the non-teleological aspect of "Where I'm Calling From," I am not asserting that the text "deconstructs itself." Nor does a text read itself. We participate in a Carver story because we must-but also because we are meant to. Consider it one-half of an ongoing dialogue. We read to listen; we react to speak; we talk about Raymond Carver and his world, our world. By offering us a vision of the self as a narrative agent, a social and relational being always already in dialogue with other selves and other histories-some good, some harmful, Carver keeps alive our hopes for human solidarity and for better ways of speaking, acting, living. The open-endedness of "Where I'm Calling From" (and other Carver stories) works to sustain the conversation between the reader, the text, and the world. Reviewing the collection *Where I'm Calling From,* David Lipsky cogently remarked:

Reading [this collection], one realizes that Carver has been not a minimalist but a precisionist, setting down, as precisely as possible, the exact words for things. He has brought news of his world into ours One Imagines that the title does not so much highlight the story of that name as reflect Carver's whole enterprise We now know where Raymond Carver has been calling from-it's a place that would have gone unremarked, in a style that would have gone unnoticed, had it not been for him

I should let Lipsky have the last word since I cannot improve on what he has said. Instead, I will end with the hope that this essay may help to provoke more and better writing about Raymond Carver.

Source: Thomas J. Haslam, "'Where I'm Calling From" A Textual and Critical Study," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol 29, No. I, Winter, 1992, pp. 57-64.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Verley analyzes the narration in "Where I'm Calling From, " using it to deduce the character traits of the story's protagonist.

The short story can be read in the following way: two alcoholics meet up in a rehabilitation centre, one of them tells his life story while the other-the narrator-listens and is then reminded of some of his own personal adventures. Life in the centre on December 31st is briefly portrayed and the narrator is trying in vain to telephone his wife while his friend, J.P., is actually visited by his wife, Roxy, the following day. The narrator's name remains a mystery as do any personal details, except for the fact that he is separated from his wife while at the same time he is not particularly interested in his girlfriend. He is afraid of having a heart attack and has clearly not recovered from his addictive state. This is all and it is not a great deal.

Only by making an implicit comparison between J.P. and the narrator can such a narrative, which is as bare of actual events as many other of Carver's works, form any consistent unity. However we cannot grasp the richness of it if we limit ourselves to declaring that Roxy has no equivalent life-force in the narrator's existence Since he remains alone at the end. We are plunged into a melodrama of alcoholism and conjugal life if we remain on the surface of things, with the dullness of the present and the pitiful shallowness of the lives depicted. Carver could thus be described as a minimalist or a miniaturist and the critics who use these terms are not paying homage to his talent by doing so.

On the contrary I would like to suggest that there is a true depth to be found in Carver's work but not in those areas where it is usually sought: neither in a psychological complexity nor in the polysemy of the themes, nor even in the intricacies of a rich style. Carver's interiority is not so much described as staged and the depth is produced by the different layers of the retrospections, the overlapping of the focalizations, the alternating and sometimes even the blending of the voices and finally the use of techniques which allow both for the diversification of narrative sources and the extension of tenses far beyond their traditional uses. The story which I have chosen to analyse here provides a good example of this hidden depth.

To begin with I am going to limit myself to a brief study of the structure of the story and of the mirror effect which it sets up between J P. and the narrator as characters since this will help to define the lines along which the analysis will be developed.

The story is made up of nine sequences separated by spaces. It is easy to distinguish a very well knit first section from sequence one to four, due to the unity of time, place and action. It is centered around J.P. who is telling his "story" to the narrator. Time breaks and fleeting minor characters (Frank Martin, Roxy, the "traveller") typify the sequences of the second section which mainly concern the narrator and his own story. J.P. is still present but remains in the background. The accent is therefore placed on the need for a comparative and contrasting reading of the two stories which are not developed in a

parallel fashion but ,with a gap between them. Sequence four, which marks a turning point, is particu1ar_y interesting in this respect. Firstly because the final analepsis, in the present tense, reinforces the unity of the first section by referring to a moment previous to the beginning of the narrative--J.P is getting ready to start his story-hence the perfect circularity of this section. More particularly it stresses the parallel between the two characters by portraying, in retrospect, their arrival at the centre one after the other even if the specific circumstances are completely different. Finally because it contrasts the inverted chronology of the two stories. The narrator's story starts off in the present with his arrival at the centre in sequence four and recedes back towards the past, whereas J.P's, begun by his fall into the well, progresses up to the present with his arrival at the centre. Neither this contrast nor the gap between the two stories are to be interpreted negatively for the time being. It appears that J.P. and the narrator each dominate in a section made up of roughly the same number of sequences and that their fates as characters are comparable in many ways.

A closer examination of these fates or rather of what shows on the surface, confirms this similarity. They are both about the same age, married, alcoholics, and J P's stay in the centre seems to duplicate the first stay of the narrator who thus describes it. "That's when we were still together, trying to make things work out. " Yet here again there is another gap since this is the narrator's second visit and he has already experienced the "shakes" which are bothering J.P. He himself suffers from them a little later, on the day when Roxy comes to visit her husband which gives the narrator the chance to ask her for the chimney sweep's kiss, which is supposed to bring good luck And here the gap widens immensely compared to the kiss Roxy gave J.P. when they first met years earlier. The narrator's request, which surprises everyone, including himself, can only be seen as a cry for help ("I need some luck" , p. 387). A childish cry but one which betrays the same anguish as that felt by J.P. at the bottom of the well It is impossible not to link this request with the constant telephone calls made in vain by the narrator and also with the cries of little J.P. "hollering for help". The title Itself, "Where I'm Calling From," plays on this double meaning and the repetition of these words in the last paragraph: "She'll ask me where I'm calling from" is merely another example of the circularity of the text.

However the young J.P. is saved by his father with the help of a rope that is far more effective than the telephone Wires. Will anybody save the narrator by rescuing him from the vicious circle of alcoholism? It is now no longer a question of a gap between the two characters but a decisive opposition. Big Tiny's seizure is related at the very start of the story, Jack London's death is mentioned in sequence four, while that of his hero is brought up on the last page. Death is recurrent and threatening for those such as J.P. and the narrator who are half-way between the ordinary world and the mythical Universe beyond the hills. One seizure means that another one is likely, one stay at the centre does not prevent another (again this circularity) and when, in the second paragraph, the narrator thinks to himself. "I know something's about to happen" we are not surprised to read on the last page that "something happens to it." The vital fire of London's hero is put out by an absurd fall of snow as absurd as Tiny's seizure or the incipient alcoholism of J.P.: "Who knows why we do what we do?" A blind fate seems to weigh upon the existence of Jack London killed by alcohol which he did not manage to

control, upon Tiny reduced to silence and fasting by an uncontrollable fear and upon the narrator who seems to be waiting for something: the warning signs of a seizure? Someone's help? His wife's voice on the telephone? J.P. goes into the centre with Roxy while he stays alone with his memories and plans to make an umpteenth phone call.

The gaps and contrasts between J.P. and the narrator are thus meaningful and they seem to suggest the accidental bringing together of two antithetical characters. Their alcoholism is a common point but their routes seem to differ. J.P. is ahead by a length (his "shakes" stop Just before the narrator's start), one could almost say ahead by a story and thanks to Roxy he takes up with life and the outside world again. At the end the narrator shows the symptoms of his dependence, he seems obsessed by a fate which is condemning him and constantly goes back in time to his two arrivals at the centre. This assessment seems completely negative and is no doubt accurate if J.P. and the narrator are put on the same level, that is to say considered as characters.

But the narrator is also a narrator and the validity of this rather too systematic contrast could be called into question if the narration Itself is taken into account. Does the narrator have the same relationship with J.P. as a narrator that he has with him as a character? His narrative function could lead to some alterations in the conclusions which have just been reached.

Let us start from the obvious fact this *is* a simultaneous narration in the present tense. Only five occurrences of the preterite (traces of a standard narrative?) can be found in the first narrative leaving aside the retrospections and memories of the past brought up in the "stones" of J.P. and the narrator. With the present tense the temporal distance is abolished and both story and narration coincide. According to Genette, this type of narration can work in two opposite directions, "depending on whether the stress is placed on the story or on the narrative discourse," in other words in a purely factual narrative (objective literature, Ecole du regard) or conversely in interior monologue narratives. "Where I'm Calling From" is written in both the present tense *and* the first person, and it presents an especially interesting exploitation of the dual function of the narrator as narrator and as character. It is first and foremost a factual narrative in which the narrator appears as a character but in certain passages resembling an interior monologue, the character completely controls the discourse. One would thus find the two directions indicated by Genette, together with the presence of a narrator who comments on the action, informs the reader and keeps the distance which his function allows. This relative complexity and the unequal distribution of the different roles of the narrator seem to suggest a much more subtle interpretation than the one previously put forward.

In the very first paragraph of the story, in fact in the first two sentences we find two examples of the simple present, one factual, the other expressing the narrator's comments on J.P.:

J P and I are on the front porch at Frank Martin's drying-out facility. Like the rest of us at Frank Martin's, J P. is first and foremost a drunk. But he's also a chimney sweep. . . .

This alternation continues throughout the paragraph and is a constant feature of the first sequences.

The narrator should also be credited With the more or less detailed presentation of minor characters: Frank Martin or the narrator's girlfriend or the "traveller" who *is* described in a paragraph detached from the factual context where the present tense has an iterative value: "One of the guys here . . . he says. . . he also says. . . he tells us. . . ." A similar control of time is shown by the narrator in the analepses which correspond to a temporal break and through which he artificially inserts an earlier part of the narrative. Finally the narrator intervenes once as organiser of the narrative when the retrospective episodes about Tiny is preceded by "J.P. can wait a minute." He thus interrupts his narrative to introduce this incident which has been brought to his mind by the mention of J.P.'s shakes and his own fears.

The shift towards the interiority of the character which is expressed by the inner monologue, becomes more pronounced in the last lines of the story:

I'll try my wife first. If she answers I'll wish her a Happy New Year But that's It I won't bring up business I won't raise my voice Not even If she starts something.

However, it is already in evidence in sequence six, in the paragraph which follows the account of the narrator's arrival at the centre, and which is characterized by a strong modalisation With the repetition of "maybe", by contradictions with "then again" and "but", by very short sentences, paratactic structures and spoken language. A similar shift is noticeable at the end of the seventh sequence with the repetition of "I don't want to talk to her". These examples are all located m the second part of the story but two others are equally to be found in the first sequence (in the second and final paragraphs) which thus appears extremely diversified since here the narrator is present as a narrator (comments, analepsis and control of the narrative), as a character (factual present) and also as a character-narrator if this taking over of the discourse by the character-just as there is a taking over of power-can be so expressed. However here it could simply be considered as a limited instance of conjunction, as it were introductory, since there are no other examples of interior monologue before the end of sequence SIX. The development of this form of discourse is therefore characteristic of the second part. On the other hand the predominance of the narrator lies almost exclusively in the first part (m the whole of the fourth sequence and the majority of the first, second and third sequences). He is absent from the last two sequences and can only be credited With one paragraph in sequence seven and two lines in sequences five and six. There is thus an extremely clear division between the narrator dominating as a narrator in the first part and as a character in the second part, as well as a shift of this narrator character towards what I have termed the character narrator to take advantage of the relationship between the two functions. Although this appears clearly, the pinpointing of the various functions contradicts what has been suggested before, that is the importance of J.P. in the first part as he tells his story and achieves, m theory, the role of narrator and the similar importance of the narrator in the second part. . . .

The emergence of a form of discourse resembling an interior monologue which is found in sequence seven and especially in the last paragraph of the short story completes the evolution of the narrator. This is the third stage following the superiority of the narrator and the ordeal of the character. The character finally takes over and tries to control the discourse, moving from dishonesty and belief in his distinctiveness towards truth and acceptance of his identity. Our analysis of the narrator-character relationship-whether this character be J.P. or the narrator himself-therefore leads us to a very different interpretation from that suggested first of all by merely taking into account the similarities and differences between J.P. and the narrator. . . .

In order that I, too, should conform to the law of recurrence and circularity which governs the structure of "Where I'm Calling From," I should like to conclude by using the same terms With which I initially defined the story while drastically altering the original suggestions. If it is indeed a question of two stories with a gap between them, they do not stand in opposition to each other; on the contrary they depict a parallel evolution which becomes noticeable when one takes into account the dual status of the narrator as a narrator and as a character. The weaknesses of the character in the second part should be analysed as following on from the rather suspect authority shown by the narrator in the first part and leading to an attempt at sincerity which leaves the final conclusion open. I would be tempted to see a symbol of this openness in the centre itself, a transitory location par excellence, but also in the well ("nothing closed off that little circle of blue") and of course in the chimneys as channels or passages from one point to another, from the inside to the outside. It is probably not mere chance that Roxy teaches J.P. his job as a chimney sweep after his father saved his life by getting him out of the well. We do not know whether the narrator benefited from similar help, whether his wife can still represent a fountainhead of life or whether he has to help himself. However, at the end of the story, it seems that the character can also find his salvation in discourse, which allows the greatest freedom and the most authentic truth, Just as before it lent Itself to a false mastery and a hypocritical detachment. In contrast to Jack London's character who submits to the destiny decided by his author, in contrast to Jack London himself-who succumbed to something stronger than himself, the character of the narrator only depends on the narrator which he, in fact, is. This at least is what is suggested with a certain amount of optimism by the narrative.

Source: Claudine Verley, "Narration and Interiority in Raymond Carver's 'Where I'm Calling From'," *in Journal of the Short Story in English,* No 13, Autumn, 1989, pp. 91-102.

Adaptations

An audiocassette entitled "Where I'm Calling From" includes a reading of this story and four others written by Carver. It was produced for Random House in 1989. All the stones are read by actor Peter Riegert

The 1993 feature film *Short Cuts,* directed by Robert Altman and released by New Line Cinema, was based on several of Raymond Carver's stones. Although "Where I'm Calling From" is not specifically included, the film does manage to convey much of the tone and many of the themes found in that story and in all of Carver's work.

Topics for Further Study

Research the common symptoms of alcoholism and approaches to its treatment How do the characters in the story "Where I'm Calling From" exhibit the symptoms you read about? Based on your research, what do you think will happen to the narrator after he leaves the facility? Citing evidence from what he reveals about himself in the story, do you think he will recover? How does his prognosis compare to J.P.'s?

Raymond Carver is called a minimalist, yet the author himself often said he disliked the term. How well do you think it applies? Open a copy of the winter, 1985 issue of the *Mississippi Review,* a special issue that was devoted to commentary on minimalism which of the various definitions of minimalism offered in the journal, if any, do you feel accurately describes "Where I'm Calling From"?

Find studies that have been conducted on the effects of living with an alcoholic and then rewrite the story from the point of view of the narrator's wife or girlfriend. What might they say about the narrator that he is unaware of himself? What might they tell us about themselves that the narrator has overlooked?

What Do I Read Next?

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976), Carver's first major book, a collection of stories written over thirteen years. This book marked a turning point in its author's career when it was nominated for a National Book Award in 1977

The stories document the development of Carver's minimalist writing style and bleak outlook on modern life.

Where Water Comes Together with Other Water (1985), Carver's best-known collection of poetry. His poems address familiar topics from daily life in a "prose-like" way, often incorporating narrative elements. This prize-winning collection has been praised for the highly distilled slices of American life it contains.

Back In the World (1985), by Tobias Wolff, Carver's friend and fellow writer. The ten stories in this collection reveal Carver's influence in their tone and subject matter. Wolff s characters, like Carver's, tend to be alienated and dispossessed, but they are perhaps also somewhat more eccentric in their fantasy lives.

Shiloh and Other Stories (1982), by Bobble.

Ann Mason, another writer associated with the minimalist revival of the short story in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Her stories chronicle the lives of lower middle-class, rural Southerners. In the title story, a couple attempts to rekindle their faltering marriage by taking a trip to see a Civil War battlefield.

Winesburg, Ohio (1919), by Sherwood Anderson, seen as one of Carver's literary progenitors.

This collection of short stories, all set in the Same small Ohio town, was controversial when It was first published, mostly due its references to human sexuality and its satirical portrayal of some religious characters. Anderson broke new ground for the realistic American short story form and had tremendous influence on generations of Writers who followed him.

At the Owl Woman Saloon (1997), by Tess Gallagher, Carver's second wife and sometime collaborator. This collection of stories includes one entitled "Rain Flooding Our Campfire," which is a retelling of Carver's story "Cathedral"

Further Study

Campbell, Ewing. *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Twayne, 1992.

In addition to close readings of most Carver's stories, this useful resource includes reprints of Carver's essay "On Writing," an interview of Carver, and short pieces on Carver by three other critics.

Herzinger, Kim, ed *Mississippi Review,* Vol 40-41, Winter, 1985.

Articles in this special issue devoted to the new minimalists present a range of views on the works of writers like Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, Ann Beattie, Tobias Wolff, and others In his influential essay, "Introduction: On the New Fiction," guest editor Herzinger sees the movement as a continuation of postmodernist trends.

Nesset, Kirk *The Stories of Raymond Carver A Critical Study,* Ohio University Press, 1995.

An in-depth analysis of the major themes and stylistic concerns in most of Carver's major stories This study includes an excellent discussion of themes of "insularity and self-enlargement" in "Where I'm Calling From."

Saltzman, Arthur *Understanding Raymond Carver,* University of South Carolina Press, 1988.

The first book-length study on Carver, Written shortly before his death, gives insightful close readings of most of his major stories and some of his poetry.

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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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