

**Falling Out Of Love in Raymond Carver's
Where I'm Calling From: A Critical Analysis**

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To Karol, my lovely wife, my support, my strength.

For Luciana, light of my eyes.

For Martina, my ever-lasting smile.

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Abstract

Through a New Criticism approach using close reading technique, the writer of the essay explores the different strategies Carver uses to describe how his characters fall out of love in his last story collection *Where I'm Calling From*. The analysis includes elements such as sexual politics, use of light, intimacy, character's vicariousness, and other symbolic elements within the stories of Carver.

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Antecedents

Carver's first personal literary influence was the writer John Gardner, with whom he took a creative writing course at Chico State College in the 60's. Not only did Gardner influence his writing style—Carver confessed that sometimes while writing, he would feel his mentor approving and disapproving sentences—but had a tremendous influence in his career. His first short story collection *Furious Seasons* gets its name from his first published story "The Furious Seasons" which has been labelled as having a great influence by William Faulkner.

Although many believe that one of Carver's most important influences was Ernest Hemingway due to their similar style, Carver stated in his essay "On Influence" that he didn't see Hemingway as an important influence on his style. However, one of most important stories "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" was inspired by a line Hemingway story "Hills Like White Elephants."

The Russian writer Anton Chekhov had a major influence on Carver. One of Carver's last stories is about the last hours of the Russian writer, a sort of biographical work that has no parallel within Carver's canon. Also, Carver's story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" was influenced by Chekhov's story "On Love." Chekhov innovated a technique called indirect action, which consists of focusing on the characterization and interactions of the characters rather than on plot. In his productions, for instance, some of the most important events happen off stage, and what is left out often becomes more relevant than what his characters actually say. This technique was adopted by Carver.

Other important influences on Carver's work include, William Carlos Williams, Guy de Maupasant, and William Yates. Also important to Carver's style was his editor, Gordon Lish. There has been some controversy as to how much Lish's hand is apparent en Carver's work. Some of the stories have even been reprinted as the "original" or pre-Lish versions of the stories. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the stories were Carver's. The plots, characters and themes came from his wit. Whether his work would have been as successful without Lish's editing, obsession with minimalism, and marketing is a totally different discussion.

Introduction

In his story collection *Where I'm Calling From*, Raymond Carver's poignant treatment of love differs in many ways of from the reverential tone often found in literature. Though there are no ornaments in Carver's stories, there are symbols, morals, and messages throughout. The stories to be analyzed in this essay illustrate the special significance that falling out of love plays in Carver's cannon. Although most of the stories had appeared in a slightly different form in previous publications, the fact that it was edited and assembled by Carver shortly before his death suggests that this is the work by which he wanted to be remembered.

In Carver's stories, falling out of love is represented in different ways. Carver uses sexual relations as a measure of love's different stages of intimacy, its ebb and flow. He uses the themes of distance, nostalgia, and longing to show how central the idea of a stable romantic relationship is to these characters' lives.

The essay will also examine symbolic elements in the stories, such as use of windows, mirrors, and light to imply convey the characters' interior struggles and their quest for self-awareness.

Theoretical Framework

The approach that will be used to analyze the stories in this essay based on the critical approach of New Criticism. New Criticism is a method which originated in the early 20th century in the United States and Britain. In 1941 the American critic and poet John Crow Ransom wrote a book titled *The New Criticism*, in which he explained that “The New Criticism was a reaction against established trends, arguing for the primacy of the text instead of focusing on interpretations based on context.”

The proponents of New Criticism, which was first employed as a technique to analyze poetry, believed that no attention should be paid to the to the context of history or the psychology of their authors but the text should approached using the technique of *close analytic reading*, with special emphasis on the connotative and associative values of words and on the multiple functions of figurative language – symbol, metaphor, and image- in the work.” In his book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*,” William Empson, one of the most representative theorists of New Criticism, claims that a text may have different interpretations according to the reader that approaches to the text:

“There could be a puzzle as to what the author meant, in that alternative views might be taken without any sheer misreading. If a pun is quite obvious it would not ordinarily be called ambiguous, because there is no room for puzzling. But if an irony is calculated to deceive a section of its readers, I think it would ordinarily be called

ambiguous, even by a critic who has never doubted it meaning.”

(Empson, 1949)

Since Carver was a poet himself, and he admitted that within his stories he assigned great value to symbols, images and metaphors, it is logical that this technique should be appropriate when analyzing his work. Carver expected his readers' own experiences and understanding of the world to serve for the interpretation of the stories. Thus, his tendency to leave stories “incomplete,” in the general conception of the term, so that they would resonate in the mind of the reader, who could form his own conclusions based on a measured reflection on how all the stories' elements work in unison.

In terms of Carver's style, Saltzman contends that there is an intention in Carver's technique for collaboration: writer and reader work together in the interpretation of the symbols: “Carver's fiction is collaborative, in that the readers are challenged to complete for themselves the fragments that have been entrusted to them” (Saltzman, 1988).

The main strategy used within New Criticism is called close reading. Close reading refers to an analysis based on the traits and characteristics of the text itself. Finding symbols, connections (intertextuality), and other aspects that the writer of a text has left in his/her work, and the way the reader interprets those symbols and connections. In other words, a text should not be examined in terms of what the authors is intending to say, but rather in terms of what it actually says under the light of the reader's interpretations. This strategy will be used in this essay and the inferences resulting from the analysis will be retaken in the final conclusions.

Biography of Carver

Carver was born in Clatskanie, Oregon, a small town with an economy centered on the wood industry; however, he spent most of his childhood in Yakima Valley, east of Washington. One could say he inherited from his father, "Clevie," his incapability of maintaining the same job for a long period of time, as well as his love of whiskey.

Carver's first encounter with literature was rather a matter of coincidence. Just before he turned nineteen, while delivering some medicaments to an elder, he was astonished by the huge library the old man possessed. The old man gave Carver a copy of *Poetry Magazine* and said "Take it home with you boy, maybe one day you'll write something worthy and you won't know where to send it."

He spent a great part of his life submerged in alcoholism, something that ultimately would lead to his death, but regained his sobriety for the last ten years of his life. During his early, sober years, his first book of stories was nominated for the National Book Award. According to the writer Richard Ford, whom he met in a literary encounter, this gave him the strength to continue with his writing career as well to stay sober.

Before devoting himself to writing, Carver went through a series of different jobs that didn't satisfy him; instead, they made him feel miserable. It was a subject he would use in many of his stories. In them, Carver deals with the dilemmas of ordinary people from the American lower and middle class: secretaries, office

workers, housewives, waitresses, salespeople, and he relates their common, yet profound struggles. It is precisely in depicting this rather mundane world that much of his greatness lies. From ordinary activities such as having friends over for dinner, visiting a neighbor, or going out for a ride, Carver is able to convey meaningful messages. In an interview, Carver admits that writing short stories and poems gave him the ability to give small things like a window, an earring, or a fork an extraordinary significance within the plot of a story, a strength that was in his own words: “disturbing.”

According to Carver many of his stories came from his own experiences or the ones he witnessed as a child and teenager back in Yakima Valley. Quoted by Carol Sklenicka, he reflected: *“That life and those people whom I knew so intimately made a very large impression in my emotional life, so I still find myself going back to that time no matter how much my circumstances might change. If I have any strength and can really make a claim in my heart for my fictions, it is because of those people”*. He had been part of the stories of people who could not afford to go to the dentist when they should have so their teeth would rot, people who were afraid to open the door because they could not pay the rent. He found that those people were worthy of having their stories told.

Carver’s style could be described as clinical and even cold, since his stories have the tendency to take apart any aspect that could “ornament” the plot in any manner and rather gives room for the reader to form his or her own idea of the reasons for the way the story unfolds. This has awarded him the title of minimalist, a label he never accepted. He claimed that his stories contained the necessary information for the reader to make his own conclusions of the characters in the

plot. John Gardner, Carver's literature teacher at the Chico State University of, had a decisive influence over Carver's writing style. "Don't use thirty words if you can use twenty or fifteen," he told him. Carver confessed that over the years he would feel his literary guide approving and disapproving lines in his stories.

Carver's inclination to write short stories and poems was mainly a decision based on his personal economy. During his first marriage, Carver's income was very low with lots of expenses. They had two children in a lapse of two years and they took out several loans to undertake studies at the college level with little advance so Carver himself and his wife, Maryann, had to work hard just to make ends meet. With the little time he had—even when he was unemployed he had to take care of the kids and the house chores—he decided to write short stories and poems because he could write them in one night and correct them in the morning. Writing a book was not an option, according to Carver; it would have been necessary to live in a solid world that made some sort of sense, which wasn't, in his opinion, his case.

Falling Out of Love in Carver's *Where I'm Calling From*

Carver's portrait of marital love is insightful, perceptive, and powerful, sometimes crude. Perhaps because of problems in his own life and marriage, Carver is able to convey profound ideas about life through ordinary characters. The topic of love is one of the most frequent in his fiction. The stories "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," "Nobody Said Anything," "They're Not Your Husband," "So Much Water So Close To Home," "What's In Alaska?", and "Put Yourself In My Shoes," explore dilemmas related to love and its decomposition. According to Hemmingson, Carver's "loves are futile and filled with despair; men love their women when there is a separation or divorce" (2008).

Kirt Nessel highlights the fact that all the stories in his first collection are different in voice and subject. "*In spite of this diversity*" adds Nessel, "*a number of constants arise in the volume...most prevalent among these is the issue of love*" (9). Nessel says that it is Carver's "obsession" to write about "love and its absence and the bearing of love's absence on marriage and individual identity." However, in the collection *Where I'm Calling From* it seems that the issue of love is treated in a darker manner not because of what Nessel refers to as the "absence of love" but because of its decay and utter extinction. Love in Carver's stories is handled as something that complicates life, a sickness that gets worse with time and ultimately vanishes. In other words, the characters are falling out of love.

The first story, "Nobody Said Anything," sets the tone for the rest of the book. Much has been discussed about the diverse meanings of the fish, the sexual implications and interactions of the characters in the story. For the purpose of this essay, however, one passage is more prominent than the rest: "They were sitting at the table. Smoke all over the kitchen...but neither of them paid any attention." This failure to notice the circumstances around both of them is a sign of lack of interest in the improvement of the relationship. The boy clearly can see it: "I could see it was coming from a pan on the burner." In this way, the narrator indicates that all the troubles going on within the intimacy of family were not a secret or something his parents could manage to hide from him and his brother.

Even at the beginning of the story, the boy claims he can hear them argue while in his sleep. The title itself is an accusation about the lack of action of his parents, whose relationship is falling apart. It seems like the boy is trying to rescue his family by providing something that could unite them again: a fish he so proudly shows at them as a token of triumph. But this backfires as it gives them yet another reason to be angry.

From the point of view of the narrator, a sign of his family's collapse is his parents' lack of sexual relations. He doesn't find any proof of a physical connection between his parents and Carver emphasizes this point by saying that "*it wasn't cold yet except at night.*" This is a clear reference to the stage of the couple's intimacy: their lack of intimacy is represented by the coldness at night.

A similar theme can be found in "What's In Alaska?", where the anticipation of a job offer threatens the stability of a couple. However, they don't appear to have

a serious conversation about the issue and instead prefer to engage in meaningless chitchat about the junk food they plan to take over some friend's.

Finally, under the influence of cannabis, their inhibitions disappear:

“Alaska?” Jack said. “What’s in Alaska? What would you do up there?”

“I wish we could go someplace” Helen said.

“What’s wrong with here?” Jack said (76).

Their moving to Alaska is a clear reference to the decomposition of love within their relationship. A couple's starting point is that usually “hot” things are exciting and new. There are projects and a sense that the future which lies ahead will bring better things: family, children, pets, memories; everything that makes a warm home. But now all those daydreams fade away under the cold light of reality.

Jack doesn't seem to pay too much attention to the evident fact that his wife is having an affair with his friend. She puts her arms around Carl in the kitchen when she thinks nobody is watching (78), calls him “honey” by an apparent mistake (80) and Carl says that his cat will need to learn to hunt when they move to Alaska (81). Why would his cat have any need to learn to hunt when his friends are the ones moving to Alaska? As in “Nobody Said Anything,” despite all these signals Jack doesn't show any symptom of jealousy beyond a quick squint when they go to the kitchen. It is almost as if he has no hope in his relationship with Mary. He acts cold when she enters the bathroom with a beer. Mary reaches out to caress his thigh but he shows no acknowledgement of the mood his wife is exhibiting.

Saltzman calls the characters' behavior “ritualistic avoidance.” Dealing with deep matters seems to be out of the question for them in spite the great burdens they carry. But as with most of Carver's characters, they are unable to act.

Saltzman asserts that “[discussing] significant subjects would be indecorous, and “heaviness” would be a “bummer.” Guarding against the inadvertent offense, they court oblivion together, which no hard question can violate. Sufficiently glazed, they can erase their respective worries for a while and believe in love and providence.” (Saltzman, 1988).

As a matter of fact, the only moment Jack is out of control is when his shoes get wet with the club soda. The ruining of his shoes is a much greater reason for anger than his wife’s possibly taking a job in a different city, without discussing it with him first, or his wife’s staring at another man in his presence. The shoes are so superficial that in the end Jack is willing to throw one at a presence in the room but it causes a more fervent reaction than any other event in the story. This is clear proof of Jack’s lack of interest in rebuilding the relationship. “There’s nothing in Alaska” (80), he manages to say. If his wife is moving to Alaska it is clear that it means there’s nothing for him to do not only in that cold land but in his marriage as well.

Runyon, in his book *Reading Raymond Carver*, suggests that the names Mary and Alaska are interchangeable in the question What’s in Alaska? (30). Since Jack has lost any sort of interest in his wife and is willing to abandon his rights as husband to Carl, who finds Mary irresistible. The cat coming into the house with a mouse in his mouth is a suggestion of the adulterous relationship Mary and Carl have been having. The cat takes its prey to the living room, the kitchen, and the bathroom, perhaps a hint of all the places they have had sex and a signal of invasion. “*I don’t think I want her eating a mouse in my bathroom,*” Helen said. “*She’s not going to get out of here,*” Carl said” (80).

Lack of sex or sex as a burden instead of a source of mutual enjoyment is a mainstay in Carver's plots. However in "Fat" it goes further and becomes a source of abusive imprisonment. "I turn on my back and relax some, though it is against my will" (69), the narrator says when her husband "starts in" on her. However, the narrator, who waits tables at a diner, doesn't express it consciously. She is not presenting herself as a victim but rather as someone who just does not know anything better. Just like the "fat" customer who persistently claims that his eating habits are a sort of compulsion he cannot control, the narrator is unable to exclude herself from having sex with a person she describes as dull and simple without any intelligent comment on any matter in the story. She now sees this man as the smallest person in the world, which releases her from his influence or any attachment she may have had before. This seems liberating, as she says: "*My life is going to change. I feel it.*"

As therapeutic as it appears, the essence of Carver's rhetoric is the sense that she is trapped, regardless of how invigorating her future may seem. Saltzman points out that many of Carver's characters "exhibit a similar tendency for self-annihilation based on the suspicion that true substance lies outside them. This results in an indefinable sense of frustration" (1988). The event that unchains this revelation is a mundane activity: serving a customer in a diner, yet she can see in a somewhat grotesque figure of a fat man who makes funny noises and has no control over how much he eats but who treats her very dearly as a basis for her to experience empowerment and worth.

She complains about another table being very demanding a couple of times, but she is happy to wait on this man who keeps ordering over and over again. It is the way he treats her that makes her self-esteem grow so high that her marital life with her husband disappears. Rudy—his name sounds like the word *rude*—becomes meaningless on top of her as she is unable to relate him with a source of happiness nor pleasure. Still, as small as this man has become in her life, he exerts great power over her. As Warnes remarks, there is an intrinsic connection between the involuntary eating of the fat man and the waitress' mechanical intercourse with Rudy: "*his robotic eating of the bread, comes to seem more of a duty than an indulgence.*" (Warnes, 2012) In the same way the waitress expresses that she "relaxes" as if surrendering to the routine which his intimacy has become.

In "So Much Water So Close to Home" sex again becomes an indication of emotional rupture in the relationship. Stuart confesses behavior of his fishing group when they discover the dead body of a young girl but refuse to go back and report it to the authorities because they had just arrived at the place and they didn't think it wouldn't make any difference. They go on with their fishing trip, play cards, drink whiskey, and have fun. When Claire hears the story, she feels identified with the girl. This causes a strain in her marriage; a sense of detachment, even repulsion emerges; a repulsion so strong that any physical contact becomes unbearable: "His fingers burn. I start, almost losing a plate" (225). Carver's description of one of Stuart's attempts to reconnect on a physical level with Claire resembles more an attack by a sex criminal than a husband being intimate with his wife:

“He steps behind me and locks an arm around my waist. One of his hand slips under my brassiere. “Stop, stop, stop,” I say. I stamp on his toes. And then I am lifted up and then falling. I look at him and my neck hurts and my skirt is over my knees” (236).

It is remarkable that right before this “assault”—some critics have suggested that Claire knows more of Stuart’s involvement in the crime—Stuart wants to play doctor and fix his wife’s heart distress with sex but ends up not hurting her physically even more emotionally: *“You go to hell then,” he says. “Do you hear, bitch? I hope your cunt drops off before I touch it again”* (236). Unable to bond through sex, Stuart finds Claire unimportant. By calling her vagina a “cunt”¹, he is degrading her sexuality to the lowest level he can think of.

Not only is Stuart unable to find a way to keep things functioning normally with Claire, he cannot understand his wife’s discontent. He says, “I have nothing to be sorry for or feel guilty about” (218). Nonetheless, it is his actions—or lack of action—that causes instability at home. Rich Fox maintains that the husband’s actions invert the typical roles of husband-wife or man-woman since Stuart attributes his acts to be responding to emotions rather than thought, while Claire remains, throughout the story, perceptive and analytic. Usually men are represented as the ones who go outside to provide whereas women stay home and take care of the family. The husband, therefore, disturbs the “natural” order of

¹ In American English Cunt is perhaps the most insulting way to call a woman’s vagina.

things, by, through “his clumsy, seemingly illogical actions, [bringing] death to the home” (16).

Stuart’s indifference toward the girl is the spark that initiates the disdain for Claire. “He called Mel Dorn and Gordon Johnson and spoke with them. Then he opened a beer and smoked a cigarette while Dean ate, asked him about school and friends . . . exactly as if nothing had happened” (219). This indifference is taken personally by Claire, who sees in it a disregard for her marriage and feels victimized, remembering her dreams lost in a life consumed by routine events.

This is a picture of her disappointment not only in the kind of life she is living, but to the things that could had been for her but never materialized. Now she feels stuck with a man she doesn’t love anymore. She thinks, “*Something has come between us though he would like me to believe otherwise*”; “*I hate him for that, for not moving.*” And even worse, she feels sorry for him: “*He can never know how much I pity him for that, for sitting still and listening.*”

The fact that she uses the third person to describe the events of her past is also noteworthy. She does not feel related to the person she used to be, she has been absorbed and belittled in such a way that she finds it hard to identify herself with the girl in the story. She thinks, “*I can’t even be sure if the things I remember happening really happened to me.*” All this emotional weight leads Claire away from Stuart. Initially, she makes a bed on the sofa, stays in bed with her son while Stuart sleeps elsewhere (probably with his mother), and finally she moves to the

extra room. Distance and lack of intimacy are the outcomes portrayed in these stories.

That same distance and lack of intimacy is elaborated in two stories with corresponding titles. Ironically—surely not by chance—they explore contradictory elements to what their titles suggest. Both stories deal with memories, change, and a sense of characters unable to move forward. “We were so *intimate* once upon a time I can’t believe it now” (446); “That was a long time ago. That was twenty years ago, he says” (186); yet, in both stories at least one of the characters is looking for some sort of understanding of the way things were, how they changed over time and how their lives together were when love was the center of their relationship. Somehow characters are trapped by demons from their past lives and try to make sense of their present state while longing for a love now disappeared.

In “Distance” memories torment the narrator who recalls his former life with warmth but now feels *cold*: “Things change, he says. I don’t know how they do. But they do without you realizing it or wanting them to...He stays by the window, remembering that life. They had laughed. They had leaned on each other and laughed until tears had come” (196-197). “Distance” tells a story inside another story. The first story is about a father who tells his daughter how his relationship with her mother used to be when she was a baby. The story inside the first one is about a young couple unable to sleep due to their baby’s crying during the night. They have an argument when the husband decides to go on with a fishing trip he has planned the day before with a man who used to be a good friend of his

deceased father. This plot mirrors Stuart deciding to go on with his fishing trip as well in “So Much Water So Close to Home.” The young husband (Carver names him the “boy”) finds himself before an important choice after his wife states that it is either his family—wife and child—or his friend and fishing trip. He chooses the latter at first, but while driving away makes his mind up and returns home. “They were kids themselves, but crazy in love” (186) the narrator states tells his daughter, referring to his past life which now seems so *distant*.

The narrator bears a nostalgic sense of loneliness, reinforced by the analogy Carver includes about geese, which, once their mate is hunted, remain alone for the rest of their lives. Even though he admits having had other relationships with other women, he is at present alone, like the goose. Saltzman comments: “*The story of geese had clearly been designed to serve as an object lesson, symbolic confirmation of love’s permanence to aid the young couple through difficult times; unfortunately...its final effect is to emphasize the inability to live up to such vows*” (1988). As in many of Carver’s stories, love is a treasure which characters persistently fail to safeguard.

In “Intimacy” a writer returns *home* this time to face past demons as he searches for both exculpation and writing material. The now ex-wife goes from expressions of hatred, pity, love and ultimately forgiveness. The ex-husband—his name is never revealed—keeps sending his former wife magazine and newspaper clippings about his career without any particular intention—or so he claims—and, although both are in other relationships, apparently this particular chapter of his life has not come to a fulfilling conclusion. “She says, ‘*Let go of the past for Christ’s*

sake. *Those old hurts*” (445). “Intimacy,” unlike “Nobody Said Anything,” which is restricted to a physical level as the boy seeks evidence of sexual intimacy among his parents’ belongings and fantasizes about intercourse with an older woman.

Here, as well as in other stories, intimacy becomes a stronger element in the plots, revealing darker sides of love in their characters. In “Intimacy,” the story relies on dialogue more than action as Bramlett and Raabe point out: “*The dearth of concrete objects gives “Intimacy” an empty, vague atmosphere in which readers get few details with which to kindle their imaginations*” (2004). In spite of the scarcity of plot details, the intensity of dialogue sketches the life they once shared and how what was formerly a source of joy has become a malady. His ex-wife says, “I loved you so much once. I loved you to the point of distraction. I did. More than anything in the whole world. Imagine that. What a laugh that is now” (446). Since the ex-husband has published stories exposing their marital life, she feels their intimacy has been betrayed.

One of Carver’s last stories combines these two elements—distance and intimacy—once again to show love not in a step by step decay but in an ultimate extinction. In “Blackbird Pie,” a husband’s world crumbles when he receives a letter from his wife—which he insists doesn’t match her handwriting--under the door of his studio informing him that she doesn’t love him anymore and has resolved to leave him for good. The narrator tells the story in an anecdotic manner and seems to be trying to convince the reader that his recall of everything that happened is accurate. Nevertheless, there are signs that although his able to keep track of

important historical facts, he has been negligent in caring for his marriage and that he has overlooked important details in his relationship.

Romantic betrayal is a common theme in Carver's stories. As Robinson observes, Carver doesn't treat the topic lightly: "There is just such a calm in society, not to be disparaged, very much to be marveled at, though it permits most forms of betrayal and self-disgrace" (1988). While in "Intimacy" the ex-wife succinctly refers to the betrayal, in "Menudo" it becomes quite explicit. Hughes finds himself unable to fall asleep because his thoughts are with his neighbor Amanda, with whom he is having an affair. Though he assures her he loves her, it seems that Hughes has a problem with commitment. He even thinks about an ex-girlfriend he used to have before he married his wife, Vicky. Throughout the story Carver presents Hughes' ideas as disorganized, first believing that Amanda's husband could be writing a forgiving letter and then assuring himself that that wasn't something he would do. Hughes assigns his rival all the qualities he does not possess: "He's relentless, unforgiving. He could slam a croquet ball into the next block—and has" (459).

Hughes would like to be like his mistress's husband, even further; he would like to be like anybody else but himself. "I wish I could be like everybody else." Nessel says Hughes "perceives happy fulfillments of others" at the same time as he is "bitter about the chaos of his life" (1995). But he fails to take action and prefers to go back to sleep, hoping for a miraculous resolution of his life, trusting in a "higher power" he doesn't even believe in. He thinks, "*I wish I could go back to sleep and wake up and find everything in my life different*" (461). Hughes knows they will not return to normal due to his betrayal—something he has experienced

before—and acknowledges it as the reason their love is vanishing. He thinks he can put [his] finger on the exact time, the real turning point, when it came undone for Molly. It was after [he] started seeing Vicky, and Molly found out” (460).

Regardless of his “misfortune” in love, Hughes keeps on trying to put his life together. Unable to enjoy the menudo his Latino friend offers as a way of relief (he falls asleep and wakes up to find that other people have taken it), he has a moment of epiphany when decides to go out and clean his neighbor’s front yards. By cleaning other people’s mess he tries to find meaning in his own because, without love, without family, life feels empty. San Juan contends that “Deep down in most of his [Carver’s] work pulsates the conviction that love, couple’s life, and family are the necessary context for the meaning of life. All of his [Carver’s] characters, even the most unfortunate, look for marital life, family reconciliation, etc” (2014).

In “Fever,” betrayal has a greater effect on Carlyle, a school teacher whose wife betrays him with a colleague and goes away, leaving him to take care of their two children, the house and his broken heart. At first, things at home, like in his failed marriage, are disastrous. There is a parallel between Eileen, the cheating wife, and the first sitter: they cannot be trusted. Consequently, just like Stuart in “So Much Water So Close To Home,” Eileen brings death to the family, however in a more figurative way: “He felt as if he were in mourning” (307). Carver illustrates lost love as a sickness that needs to be cured. Surprisingly for a Carver character, however, Carlyle finds relief in speech. “*Keep talking, Mr. Carlyle. Sometimes it has to be talked about . . . and you’re going to feel better afterward . . . Love. That’s what it is*” (330). As Campbell notes, Carver uses the fever in the story like a “creative illness” that serves as a turning point. “*The sickness ends in a state of*

exhilaration, from which the sufferer emerges with a sense of permanent change and the marked conviction that a great truth has been achieved." (Campbell 1992)

Carlyle reaches his great truth once his fever is gone:

...But he understood it was over, and he felt able to let her go... It was something that has passed. And that passing—though it had seemed impossible and he'd fought against it—would become part of him now, too, as surely as anything else he'd left behind (247).

Holly and Duane in "Gazebo" are not as lucky as Carlyle. Although they seclude themselves in one of the apartments in the motel they manage together in an attempt to fan one more time the flames of their love, memories of his betrayal corrupt the couple's serenity. *"My heart is broken. . . .It's turned to a piece of stone."* (140) Duane has used the rooms to execute his deceitful acts with Juanita, one of the maids. While in "Fever" Carver offers a progressive improvement in Carlyle as his love for Eileen is "expelled," in "Gazebo," love's disintegration progressively harms those who inhabit its lands. Love's corrosion is represented through representations of physical neglect and structural decay, at first, the motel seems to be a safe edenic scenario where everything works properly. *"Free rent and free utilities plus three hundred a month. You couldn't beat it with a stick."* *"I [...] mowed the grass and cut the weeds, kept the pool clean, did the small repairs. Everything was fine for the first year."* (140). As the story progresses and love is betrayed, elements of deterioration appear. *"I stopped cleaning the pool. It filled up*

with green gick so that the guests wouldn't use it anymore" (144). The falling apart of the motel represents the corruption of love.

Tiles fall down, faucets break, guests are over or undercharged, rooms are inaccurately booked, managers are drunk at work. "*We just didn't have the heart for it anymore,*" Duane admits, referring to the business, while Carver allows his readers to infer that Duane is talking about his marriage. Even though Runyon considers Duane's words ambiguous —"*It is not clear whether it's the end of their discontent that they've reached, or the end of their marriage*" (100), It is quite explicit that both Duane and Holly acknowledge their relationship is terminated as Saltzman observes: "The moment Duane and Holly concede that they have irreparably "fouled" their lives, the tide of desolation overcomes them. They seal themselves up inside their motel, stop answering the phone . . . and let it all go to seed, as if to corroborate their judgment over themselves" (1988).

Nonetheless, the epiphany doesn't end there, at Duane's realization of his now lost married life. Carver includes yet another source to express hopeless love: the description of the gazebo: "*It was out back under some trees? It had a little peaked roof and the paint was gone and there were these weeds growing up over the steps. And the woman said that years before, I mean a real long time ago, men used to come around and play music out there on a Sunday*" (146). In a sense Holly is describing her soul. She feels that she was once beautiful but that seems very distant to her now. It is peculiar that she uses the word *men* to refer to those who used to enjoy the beauty of the gazebo instead of *people*, a more general word. If on one hand, knowing that the relationship has come to an end is an

epiphany moment for Duane, Holly, on the other hand, has her own epiphany as she realizes that her best times are over.

Structural context is used in other Carver stories to represent love's decay. In "Little Things," perhaps one Carver's darker stories because of what its ending suggests, love's mold is typified in physical elements. A strategy Carver once admitted during an interview to be one of his favorites. Carver doesn't say much but suggests it all. The story has explicit violence, both physical and verbal. The resolution of the "issue" happens outside the pages of the book. "The grim conclusion," say German and Bedell, "*the breaking or dislocating of the baby's arm, occurs in the reader's mind, after some thought*" (1987). And it is precisely the suggestiveness of the physical elements that bring the reader to the conclusion of this "Horror Story," as Hemmingson labels it. The scarcity of light, the narrowness of spaces, the dirtiness of the water turning into mud, the breaking of things: these components add up to the death of love and the story concludes in the exact same way: death. But unlike Duane and Holly, who choose to lock themselves up in an attempt to rebuild their lost love in "Gazebo," the anonymous couple of "Little Things" is placed there by circumstances that the reader is left to interpret—another strategy Carver again admitted using. For instance, windows serve a double purpose; they allow individuals to see their lives both with love and without love for they are means to diffuse what is outside themselves--most of the time unattainable states of well-being.

In “A Serious Talk,” Burt experiences again what life within a loving family feels like when he comes to visit for Christmas—and tries to burn the house down in what can only be interpreted as an attack of jealousy—but faces the wreckage of a life now gone: “He moved the curtain aside and looked out at the backyard. He saw a bicycle *without* a front wheel standing *upside down*. He saw the *weeds growing* along the redwood fence” (165, emphasis added). Due to the fact that he is no longer an essential part of the family, he feels like a stranger in what used to be his home and tries to leave his mark by removing his ex-wife’s boyfriend’s cigarette butts and replacing them with his own: “*He studied the butts in it. Some of them were Vera’s some of them weren’t...He got up and dumped it all under the sink . . . [Then] he put it back on the table. And then he ground out his own cigarette in it*” (166).

In an equally unsettled mental state is L.D. in “One More Thing.” As with Burt, his mind envisions a better life but this time outside the senseless environment of his house which both his daughter and wife are forcing him to leave. “*There’s another life out there,*” Burt says. “*Believe me, this is no picnic, this nuthouse.*” He could feel *the air from the hole in the window on his face*. “*That’s where I’m going,*’ he said. ‘*Out there,*’ he said and pointed” (Emphasis added). As a result of their actions, these characters are left immobilized, unable to move forward with their lives now that the love has dissipated. Nessel compares this dilemma to that of Hughes in “Gazebo,” who acknowledges his powerless condition before his fate. Cut off from “normal” happiness, he says. “I’m outside all that now, and I can’t get back inside” (Nessel, 1995).

Again in “Chef’s House,” it is through a window that hope in love is represented: “You can see the ocean from the front window. You can smell salt in the air” (297). The window shows Wes’s image of love back into his life. He invites his wife to come back and live this “dream” with him. Edna agrees to give it one more chance, not without being warned by her current boyfriend who feels it will be a mistake. She admits not having much hope herself. Everything seems to be working out properly. They enjoy the summer, go out for dinner, go fishing, go to the movies and Wes is attending his “No drinking” meetings. But the news of an inexorable “eviction” due to Chef’s daughter’s misfortune disrupts the honey-moon-like time they are experiencing.

David Means claims that surely Wes was already at the edge of his resistance when he hears the news of fat Linda’s husband going missing. For a person in Wes’ situation, the house represents stability. So, when the house is taken away, stability crumbles. Wes, looking out to the vast ocean that had symbolized beauty and hope, is facing his past tribulations and reflecting on his now obscure future. Feeling defeated, he decides to shut the curtain on his dreams. He “*got up and pulled the drapes and the ocean was gone just like that . . . There wasn’t much else . . . and that will be the end of it*” (302).

Also remarkable in this story is the treatment Carver gives light to represent love fading away. The story begins in summer, the season with the most light. But as the story progresses, light gradually disappears. When the news of fat Linda’s husband arrives in the afternoon, clouds start to build up (obstructing light) and finally the shades are pulled, closing off all light. Intruders at Chef’s house, they are

living a life which Carver places beyond their grasp: "*He got up from the chair and went to the window. He stood looking at the ocean and at the clouds. He patted his chin with his fingers like he was thinking of something.*" (300)

But being *evicted* from love is not a situation exclusive to Edna and Wes in "Chef's House." Equally bereft are Bill and Arlene Miller, a married couple in "Neighbors" who look after their neighbors' apartment while they go on vacation. Similar to Hughes in "Menudo," who wishes to live his neighbor's lives, the Millers find themselves wishing their neighbors would never return. Here, however, Carver elaborates the daydream much more, for Hughes can only imagine how his neighbors' live, like while The Millers get to cross the threshold of their enclosure into their neighbors' intimacy. They eat their food, dress up in their clothes, have sex on their bed, drink their liquor and see life the way the Stones see it from their window. But as with Wes and Edna in "Chef's House," the flames of love Bill and Arlene experiences are an illusion that seems to only exist within the borders of a borrowed dwelling. As a result, once the keys which allowed their illusion to exist are taken away, they have no other option but to face the cruel reality of their own lives.

Another aspect that echoes the couple in "Chef's House" are the Bermudas and the Hawaiian shirt that Bill tries on. As a critic notes, both pieces of clothing entitle paradisiac islands, which parallels Wes' privileged sight of the ocean from Chef's window. However, the happiness they suggest is darkened once Craver's characters face their true situation. Though boosted by inauthentic stimulus, love

has no means of subsistence because, as the couple in “Chef House” and the Millers in “Neighbors” come to realize, it results in harmful outcomes that worsen, perhaps irredeemably, a couple’s balance. As Nessel discerns, “Carver’s lovers brace themselves against the consequences of inauthentic passion, a false kind of love which, requiring its stimulus from outside influence, feeds on the attractive possibilities of other worlds and other lives at the cost of self” (Nessel 1995).

Astounding, though, is the line which begins the story: “The Millers were a happy couple.” For a Carver story this is odd, to say the least, since happiness is not commonplace in his stories. However, as Saltzman points out, that sentence summons the comparison the Millers make of their life with their neighbors’ because their life feels insignificant and mundane compared to the life of the Stones, leaving them with a sense that things are not as healthy as they thought once they face the void of their marital life. When Bill looks at himself in the mirror, he doesn’t like what he sees and chooses to close his eyes; subsequently, he dresses up in the clothes of the Stones in an attempt to experience the delights of a life that seems unattainable to him. If in “Chef’s house” and “The Students’ Wife” windows serve as a means to observe life outside of self, the mirror here reinforces this vicariousness or voyeurism, because Bill not only gets to see a greener pasture next door but he is also forced to confront the aridness within his marital life.

Bill and Arlene feel that their sex life has been refreshed once they seclude themselves inside their neighbor’s apartment. In fact, their psyches experience a

change, an emancipation from their dull life—Bill is a bookkeeper and Arlene a secretary—and become, at least within their fantasies, the bearers of a more elegant, interesting and sexually active life which disappears every time they leave the apartment. In this way, little by little, the Millers discover that they are not a happy couple after all: “Well, I wish it was us,” Bill remarks as the Stones drive away, foreshadowing what is to come.

As Boxer and Philips note, these close encounters with other people’s lives take away the character’s identities, leaving them in limbo: “As [*Carver’s*] *dissociated characters tentatively reach out toward otherness, Carver ambushes them, giving them sudden, hideously clear visions of the emptiness of their lives.*” The trap for Bill and Arlene lies in their own mischievous behavior, since the flames of their refueled love are fictional. Lacking a solid foundation, they try to borrow, even pocket, bites of a love that does not belong to them. Carver illustrates this thievery through the cigarettes and the medicine the Millers take from the Stones: “*He found a container of pills and read the label...and slipped it into his pocket*”; “*He pulled out a nightstand drawer, found a half-empty package of cigarettes and stuffed them into his pocket*” (88-89). What Bill cannot pocket from the Stones is their lifestyle, and the traces of love he finds in their habitat, although he and Arlene would like to believe otherwise: “*He tried to recall what day it was. He tried to remember when the Stones were due back, and then he wondered if they would ever return*” (90).

Discussing the issue of love in Carver’s rhetoric, however, would be incomplete without referring to one of the story that addresses the topic in perhaps

the most direct way possible: "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Two couples are sitting at a kitchen table sharing stories from their previous experiences with love, or at least their conception of love. More than trying to define love, it seems that Carver is trying to say what love is not, and what people are willing to suffer as long as they feel it is present in their lives. The reason this story has been left last to discuss is because it combines most, if not all, of the elements that have been covered so far.

"What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" tells the story of Mel, his wife Terri, Nick (the narrator) and his wife Laura. Mel is a cardiologist (another symbolic element) who is trying to explain to his friends and wife what he thinks love is. As the conversation progresses, so does its melancholic tone. Under the increasing influence of alcohol, the characters become sadder and sadder. Finally, what appears at first to be a cheerful rendezvous of friends having a good time ends with an abrupt sense of despair and the certainty that love, its decomposition, its ultimate absence, has broken their hearts in a sort of ailment that even a cardiologist like Mel—in spite of his advanced degree in issues of the heart—is unable to put right.

The story includes a depiction of love's degradation in the figure of Terri's ex-husband, Ed, about whom Terri says, "Sure, sometimes he may have acted crazy. Okay. But he loved me. In his own way maybe, but he loved me. There was love there, Mel. Don't say there wasn't" (171). Terri is trying to convince her current husband that Ed's behavior was the result of a sort of love that had sickened him to the point of beating her—the reader can infer that once she left him for Mel—and pushed him to the limits of his mental stability so that he tried twice to kill himself.

He ate rat poison but it didn't kill him; instead, his face swoll up and he became a sort of monster. Then he shot himself, leaving him to agonize for three days with his head "twice the size of a normal head." His deformation is a representation of his soul. As Mel signals in the story, love is spiritual. However, Carver illustrates the destructive power love possesses in the decomposition of Ed and in his final extinction: "*Sure, it's abnormal in most people's eyes. But he was willing to die for it. He did die for it*" (174).

In spite of Mel's criticism about his wife's ex-husband, he then admits, almost inadvertantly, his own collapse when he was married to his former wife who was allergic to bees, and how he fantasized killing the woman he claims he "loved...more than life itself" by coming to her house dressed as a beekeeper and letting loose a hive of bees. The same destructive elements come into play again. Bees are related to honey, a word often used with someone one loves, except they are being used as a weapon to kill the same someone he once loved. This behavior, although only a flight of the imagination, echoes Ed dragging Terri around the house telling her he loved her at the same time he calls her a bitch. "*He went on dragging me around the living room,*" Terry says. "*My head kept knocking on things*" (170).

Mel is not without his own scars. Even though he considers his five years in a seminary the most important time in his life, his soul, the cornerstone of his idealistic love, has succumbed to the mundane distress of earthly predicaments. He says, "*What do any of us really know about love? . . . I mean, I don't know anything, and I'm the first one to admit it*" (176-177). His rather pessimistic tone comes from the knowledge that all of them, however much they love their current

partners, have been in and out of love multiple times and they will most likely fall out again this time.

Mel comes to the conclusion that no matter how greatly in love someone claims or believes himself to be, that love is ephemeral, for it depends on factors that transform or deform it. Like Ed's face and head which have become something that shouldn't be seen. As Saltzman accurately remarks, "*The greatest obstacle to any ideal of love turns out to be the transitoriness of love. After all, both Mel and Terri have vowed allegiance to their original partners, so what is there to prevent the same deterioration from happening again?*" (Saltzman, 1988). Moreover, Mel's disappointment in the story is undermined by his own description of his job as a heart surgeon. Gomez-Vega points out that Mel's portrayal of his profession lacks any romanticism or spirituality, something he has said is important for him. Instead, he labels himself a "mechanic" but, since love, the cornerstone of his life, has disintegrated, the other piece of his personal structure is without solid support. "*He seems to have no romantic notion about his role as a surgeon and his knowledge of medicine. What he claims to know is love, and one of the things he knows about love is that, in his world, love is a fleeting emotion*" (Gomez-Vega 2004). Therefore the old couple that he meets at the hospital after a car accident astounds him. That kind of love is something he will never experience again. Gomez Vega observes, "*He knows that love, the thing that he claims to value and know the most about, is something that has eluded him*" (Gomez-Vega 2004).

Love in Carver's stories is ephemeral and in an inexorable process of deterioration. As in "Chef's House", light serves as a means to convey changes in the character's emotions and states of mind. At first, it symbolizes friendship,

cheerfulness and love: “*The afternoon sun was like a presence in this room, the spacious light of ease and generosity. We could have been anywhere, somewhere enchanted*” (176). Then it makes a transition to conflict: “The light was draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come. Yet nobody made a move to get up from the table to turn on the overhead light” (183). Finally, as the story advances, the light is extinguished, leaving both couples in the darkness of their own thoughts, unable to move, their hearts beating: “*I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone’s heart...not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark.*”

The image of their hearts beating in the dark echoes Claire’s vision of the dead girl with her eyes open in “So Much Water So Close To Home.” Carver uses two body parts which are not working the way they should. Of course the heart is still beating, but Carver is conveying throughout the story that the main function of this organ is to feel love. And, in this sense, it is failing.

Deterioration, then, is represented in Mel’s judgment and the weakening of his sobriety with every glass of Gin. Although he assures to love Terri, as his drinking starts to affect his behavior, his language deteriorates: He mixes stories, leaves sentences uncompleted, confuses words and uses a contradictory tone of offensive and deferential language with his wife “*Just shut up for once in your life . . . Will you do me a favor and do that for a minute?*” (178) Perhaps Mel would like to let himself go and trust again, believe in love, but his *spiritual* belief has been corrupted, therefore, he feels his feelings imprisoned; captive within the limitations that secure him against possible wounds of the soul: “*Folks, this is an advertisement for the National Safety Council*” (179). As observed by Runyon in

Reading Raymond Carver, the need for Mel to protect himself is so strong in his mind that it is projected in different forms in the story, first with the protective gear of a beekeeper, the armor of a knight and finally in the cast that covers an old couple he met at the intensive care unit where he works.

Mel professes that true love should be observed in the all ways of knights but again contradicts himself: "I'd like to come back as a knight. You were very safe wearing all that armor." Nonetheless, the armor is nothing more than a cage that, rather than protect against what exists in the outside, locks within, suffocating and weakening emotions underneath: "*But sometimes they suffocated under all that armor...They'd even had heart attacks if it got too hot and they were too tired and worn out*" (181).

As Gomez-Vega remarks, once characters fall out of love, they always seem to express frustration through violence, whether linguistic or physical, when snugness—as Saltzman labels it--is taken away from their relationships, violence takes the scene:

"In Carver's story, people may talk about love, but the love is not evident in their lives...They talk about what they think love means in the safety of Mel and Terri's kitchen...what the kitchen should provide actually "erodes"...Their lives are infected with a rage that "erodes" through intimate violence even when they claim that they are not violent." (Gomez-Vega, 2004)

Unarticulated, unable to express their true feelings through words, floating in an emotional limbo, Carver's characters can't carry on with their emotional load,

which drags them erratically around in a constant vicious circle while they keep bumping into failure. Just like Terri, whose head kept bumping while she was dragged by her ex-husband, the characters would rather suffer in the name of love, and bet all their stakes on a life-meaning roulette, even though, like any casino player knows deep inside, the chances of obtaining the big pot are rather slim.

Conclusions

Love is a mighty force in Carver's stories. Unfortunately for his characters, its benefits, those which bring harmony to the heart and meaning to life in the form of sense of belonging and transcendence, are beyond their reach. It is not that love is unknown to them, for they are witnesses of love's revenues in other people's lives. They have experienced also love themselves, but love has been either transitory or artificial. In the end, they stumble over the debris of their unarticulated emotions.

Carver depicts in his stories the gradual fading out of love. With few moments of brightness, darkness dominates the landscape. But darkness is, most of the time, not the starting point in his rhetoric, yet, almost ineludibly; it is there at the end. In the darkness that enfolds the stories, its characters look for hope, a change in the tide of their lives, but uncertain as they are, they recur to violence, to alcohol, or are left hopelessly at the mercy of their melancholic destiny.

If love is mighty in Carver's stories, its absence—the falling out of love—has in fact, catastrophic effects, and characters are the victims. They feel sexually unsatisfied or abused; their partners betray them, taking away the essence of their trust and their desires of betterment in a world that is presented many times as chaotic, eroded, or lacking emotional resources.

But above all, Carver's characters dream. They dream of love, of better days, of better selves, and they search continually for the realization of those dreams. They peer out of windows of hope that promise antidotes for the malady

that failures in love have bought into their lives. They look into pictures of strangers, watch them dance, kiss each other; in an attempt to find outside themselves answers for the constant questions Carver places for them to resolve: “Why Don’t You Dance?”, “Why Honey”, “Are These Actual Miles?” Nonetheless, Carver never provides them with answers. His style, his *cutting to the bone*² leaves them in starvation. Deprived from nurture, their famished souls cannot sustain meaningful relationships. As a consequence, they settle for a superficiality that is expressed out in Carver’s constant use of silence.

² Carver admitted in an interview he had worked in these stories as he had never done with any to this point of his life, and that he had cut them to the bone, meaning he had tried to extract from them as much as possible.

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