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The Symbolic Significance of Vice in Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk
About Love*: Blue-Collar Despair Transcending Class Distinction

*"It's important to be reminded that we're human . . . I think it's a noble undertaking, this
business."*

–Raymond Carver

Raymond Carver's literary reputation is often defined as a minimalist writer who is known for his ability to effectively chronicle blue-collar despair. Because of his focus on characters of a lower class background, his fiction has occasionally been called "K-Mart Realism," "Hick Chic," "Postliterate Literature," or "White Trash Fiction" (Saltzman 5). And indeed he does, as critic and Carver scholar Arthur Saltzman notes, "depict working-class conditions with genuine sympathy and authority" (2), but to assume that the audience Carver depicts is the only audience that he is writing to is to seriously undermine his literary dexterity. His representations of the lower-class setting in his fiction have led to worldwide attention of his work and in turn, universal recognition of the plight of his characters. His is a world any reader can empathize with.

Two years after Carver's death in 1988, his widow, Tess Gallagher, set out with photographer/producer Bob Adelman to document certain aspects of Carver's life and career, titling this conglomeration of photographs, essays, and primary writings *Carver Country*. Gallagher coined the term "Carver Country" to represent the wide net of readers his fiction has cast, noting "the fact that the stories seem to travel so easily would suggest that Carver Country finds its corresponding territory in the lives of people nearly everywhere" (9). Gallagher is certainly right about this; even before Carver's death, his work had been translated into twenty-three languages to renowned international success. The question is, why is his fiction so universal and relatable? What is it about his characters and settings that captures the attention of millions?

One answer to these questions is his ability to illustrate characters that you think you have met or that remind you of those that you know; they may even remind you of yourself. Carver's characters are seriously flawed in many ways. There are no instances of heroics or exemplary protagonists in his fiction. They work low-paying jobs for long, thankless hours. They fight with their spouses and sometimes resent their children. They don't always follow their moral compass and they certainly cling to activities and objects that hurt them more than they understand; many are fervent drinkers and smokers. And what is remarkable is that despite being literary characters, they are as inarticulate as they come and end up suffering in silence. Despite that silence, they can be seen and felt everywhere. They may be janitors, or delivery men, or gas station attendants – all jobs that Carver held himself at one time or another – the type of people you see every day in public but rarely engage with. You cannot escape them and most importantly, they cannot escape themselves.

None of Carver's fiction or poetry collections reach this extreme level of despair and silent suffering quite like his short story collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Many literary critics place this collection as having a feeling of searching for the lost "hope in Hopelessville" (Nesbet vii). The last short story collection published before the rejuvenating *Cathedral*, *What We Talk About* is the emotional rock bottom of Carver's works. Critic Kirk Nesbet notes that this collection's "prose style, which had earlier been looser and slightly fuller, constricts as if in obedience to his fiercer subject matter, to the thinly veiled rage of his characters" (31). Amidst all of the anguish and vexation of his characters, one might wonder how they are able to cope and to live their daily lives with such heavy burdens on their shoulders and no manner in which to express their suffering. Carver answers this question with a symbolism of sorts; in nearly every story, he includes the presence of several key vices.

My use of the word "vice" as I have applied it here is in accordance with a definition from the Oxford English Dictionary. "Vice (n.): a habit or practice of an immoral, degrading, or wicked nature." His characters are more pitiable than they are deliberately wicked, to be sure; nevertheless, they can see that the objects and habits they cling so desperately to are harmful, but they ignore these negative effects and degrade themselves further with each use (or misuse). Saltzman notes "[t]hey drink and smoke more than they know they should" (3) and this applies as well to how they utilize other distractions. Their acknowledgement and dismissal of negative consequences further illustrates his characters to be predominantly weak in their anguish.

The five symbolic vices that Carver incorporates again and again include: cigarettes; sex; television; caffeine (most commonly in coffee, but also in tea); and alcohol (both as beer and as hard liquor). Out of the seventeen stories published, sixteen of them have one, and often more, of these objects present. There is something to be said for the volume of their use in this

collection. These five repetitive symbols are impossible to ignore as static fixations in each story. In several cases, they propel the storyline forward or complement the dialogue present. As they are used in this novel, they are believable, necessary, and because of their universality, relatable to a surprisingly large audience. They are a key figure in allowing Carver's audience to truly empathize with his fiction: no matter where they are from, these vices are recognizable by everyone.

However, in order to properly closely examine symbolism in this particular collection of stories, one has to consider the complications of the editorial controversy that accompanied it. It wasn't revealed to the public until several years after *What We Talk About* had been published that Carver may have been displeased with the severity of editor Gordon Lish's cuts and edits to the collection of stories ("Rough Crossings"). And indeed, Lish did drastically, by volume, cut Carver's original manuscripts – some by more than half. What was principally removed involved extraneous personal detail regarding character background, and conversational digressions irrelevant to the story's linear progression – in essence, anything that did not contribute to the story's communication of characters and things in the present moment. These specific types of editorial cuts can most prominently be seen in a draft comparison between Carver's original version of the title story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," when it was known as "Beginners."

"Beginners," published in its unedited form in a feature in *The New Yorker Online* in 2007, is particularly pertinent to examine in this context because of the heavy edits it was subject to. Some edits, like switching several characters from one generic name to another (Carl to Ed and Herb to Mel, for example) may seem arbitrary to an outside reader, and possibly are. But the more severe edits, the ones that slashed the volume of this story by more than half, do appear to

have some deeper implication of keeping the narrative in the present moment. The story begins with four characters – Terri, Herb, Laura, and Nick, the narrator – sitting a table, talking, and drinking gin. As the characters converse, the first large edit Lish made regards Terri’s background:

She was fifteen years younger than Herb, had suffered periods of anorexia, and during the late sixties, before she’d gone to nursing school, had been a dropout, a “street person” as she put it. Herb sometimes called her, affectionately, his hippie.

If one is to read the rest of this draft, it becomes obvious that this background is irrelevant to the story, and doesn’t come up again. Another longer paragraph that was cut involves where the characters might go eat after they are finished drinking at their house:

‘It’s called The Library,’ Terri said. ‘You haven’t eaten there yet, have you?’ she said, and Laura and I shook our heads. ‘It’s some place. They say it’s part of a new chain, but it’s not like a chain, if you know what I mean. They actually have bookshelves in there with real books on them. You can browse around after dinner and take a book out and bring it back the next time you come to eat.’

In the interest of saving space, I have omitted the second half of the edit; this excerpt alone shows its length and deviation from the storyline, as the characters never actually go to this restaurant, and its place in the story is never made clear in theme or plot. The largest edit by far occurs in a story Mel, a cardiologist, tells. An accident had happened and an elderly couple was horrifically injured, and Mel was one of many doctors working to save them. Lish cut several pages worth of background on these characters, including where they were from, who and where their kids were, and other information that was ultimately immaterial to the heart of its place in this subplot: the elderly couple missed one another and were upset to be in separate rooms in the hospital, demonstrating their kind of love as companionable in this discussion on the many varieties thereof. Any further digression seems unnecessary.

Lish liberally deleted from, added to, and reordered some of Carver's manuscripts, as can be seen in several draft comparisons, but it is the job of an editor to do so, and thus far in his career Carver had been more than pleased with Lish's help. In 1980 Carver sent many encouraging letters to Lish regarding the edits that had already been done on several stories, even expressing:

You know, I feel closer to you than I do to my own brother . . . There's no question of your importance to me. You're my mainstay . . . For Christ's sweet sake, not to worry about taking a pencil to the stories if you can make them better; and if anyone can you can. I want them to be the best possible stories, and I want them to be around for a while. . . . Be enough, you know, to have Knopf do a book of mine and have you as my editor. So open the throttle. Ramming speed. (Letter from Carver to Lish, May 10, 1980).

The last two sentences stress Carver's willingness to work with Lish on major edits. Out of context, there are articles attempting to be exposé in nature that will quote another letter from Carver to Lish regarding certain editorial cuts. The letter is distressed in nature and was sent after Carver had seen the final version of his manuscript for *What We Talk About* before it went to press, but the fact is that its tone is rigorously out of sync with dozens of other letters between the two. Two days after writing the infamously troubled letter, Carver wrote another one to Lish calmly discussing minor edits, and signing it, "with my love" ("Rough Crossings"). Certainly, Lish put his two cents and more into Carver's manuscripts, but in the end it was ultimately Carver's resolution to agree that the critical significance of each story had not been irreparably altered.

I suspect there will always be critics who cling to the idea that Lish wrote vicariously through Carver's career. The public loves a good conspiracy theory. However, if one is to look at Carver's essay "On Writing," published 1983 in his collection of short stories, essays, and poetry called *Fires*, one can see that Lish's edits, though voluminous, do seem to fit in with

Carver's ideals of literature. The first advice Carver gives is to "Get in, get out. Don't linger. Go on" (13). He notes that he has three-by-five cards of quotes from Ezra Pound and Geoffrey Wolff taped to his wall: "Fundamental accuracy of statement is the ONE sole morality of writing," and "No cheap tricks," respectively (14). He does amend Wolff's mantra to his own, "No tricks.' Period. I hate tricks . . . writers don't need tricks or gimmicks or even necessarily need to be the smartest fellows on the block" (14). These ideas – don't linger, say precisely what you mean, and don't attempt to deceive your reader – are supportive of many of the edits to "Beginners." The background of the elderly couple in the hospital that was edited out fits all of them; it was long, drawn out, and irrelevantly led the reader far away from the present moment only to snap them back after the information was communicated. Ultimately, Lish's edits do fit in with Carver's simple advice.

There is also something to be said for the economy and simplicity of words that Carver was famous for, especially under the editing hand of Lish, although this also seems to go with Carver's ideals of writing (although this economy tended to lump Carver in with "minimalist" writers, he disliked this label and he tended to avoid defining himself and his work). He noted, "If the words are heavy with the writer's own unbridled emotions, or if they are imprecise and inaccurate for some other reason – if the words are in any way blurred – the reader's eyes will slide right over them and nothing will be achieved" (16). The accuracy and power of the syntax in *What We Talk About* is startling with this sharpness. The honing of each story to that precision is also something that Carver expressed pleasure with. In an Afterword to *Fires*, he wrote of his inclination towards revision:

I like to mess around with my stories. I'd rather tinker with a story after writing it, and then tinker some more, changing this, changing that, than have to write the story in the first place. . . Rewriting for me is not a chore – it's something that I like to do. . . Maybe I

revise because it gradually takes me into the heart of what the story is *about*. I have to keep trying to see if I can find that out. It's a process more than a fixed position. (188)

His disposition to rework even already distinguished stories explains why there are several drafts of many of them. Several of the stories published in *What We Talk About* were originally published elsewhere, and were revised and republished here; other stories were revised and republished later after originally being published in this collection. One story, "So Much Water So Close to Home," has three published versions, and several other unpublished ones that were found amongst Carver's possessions (Leypoldt 318). If one understands Carver's methods of writing in these ways, they will ultimately be reconciled that Lish's edits to this collection of stories in particular do appear to fit in with Carver's self-defined theoretical ideals of the short story.

It is remarkable to consider the possibility that when it comes to critiquing literature, perhaps none of these difficulties – the editing process, the author's intentions, or the author's potential displeasure with a final manuscript – are significant in a critical framework. In the dozens of critical essays that I consulted, not one mentioned the Lish-Carver editing controversy; that information was discovered in publications of a more sensational or entertaining nature (in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*).

Carver's love for the power of the symbolic is another notion that becomes apparent when reading his essay "On Writing." He notes that "at the risk of appearing foolish, a writer sometimes needs to be able to just stand and gape at this or that thing – a sunset or an old shoe – in absolute and simple amazement" (14). This indication that there is power in objects or "things" surfaces yet again:

It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window

curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power . . . That's the kind of writing that interests me. (15)

This idea of commonplace entities holding astounding command for the reader rings very true when examining the several common objects in *What We Talk About*: the five vital vices that reappear so often. Just like that woman's earring or chair, he has bestowed power and meaning in these common objects, and he reinforces this power by replicating their appearances in his fiction.

To discuss the symbolic significance of vices utilized in Carver's *What We Talk About*, it is necessary to ask, why exemplify these known habits or comforts? What is imperative to understand about each is that no matter where a reader is from – whether it be a different continent, economic background, or social upbringing – they are vices that can be recognized and appreciated by nearly any civilized person. Cigarettes, sex, television, caffeine, and alcohol exist in one form or another almost anywhere in the world. This universality plays a key role in Carver's fiction; it is crucial in demonstrating to any reader that the despair of the lower class he has been declared champion of could be anywhere and in this way, he succeeds in having that blue-collar despair transcend that particular class distinction. Through these relatable symbols, the desolation of the lower class is made tangible to his entire broad readership – through these vices, they are initiated into Carver Country.

Cigarettes as avoidance. Smoking was a vice very well-known and understood by Carver, and it is no surprise that cigarettes play such an enormous role in his fiction. Carver himself died of lung cancer from years of smoking on August 2nd, 1988. Consider the role of cigarettes in modern society: a smoker excuses themselves from work or a social group to step outside and partake in this particular vice. Whether intentionally or not, this causes cigarettes to have a directly avoidant role in a smoker's life, effectively making them ignore or put off

inevitable work or conversation. Even when Carver quit drinking late in his life, he was unable to overcome his addiction to nicotine and continued to smoke for many years. Like two of the other vices used frequently in this collection, cigarettes are physically addictive and difficult to step away from. This, perhaps, is one of the most important things about the use of physical vices in this collection: his characters are too desperate and too weak to step away from what they know is harming them. They are charmed by the vice's apparent soothing qualities and ignore the danger that lurks underneath. Also significant to the role of cigarettes (or tobacco) in their symbolic meaning is they can be recognized anywhere in one form or another, from chewing tobacco to cheap cigarettes to the most expensive Cuban cigars.

Sex as emotionally corrosive. Of the vices in this collection, sex is certainly the most complicated to interpret. It isn't necessarily harmful for the body like the overuse of cigarettes, alcohol, or caffeine can be, yet it is shown to be caustic to relationships. Sex does not represent a healthy marriage or partnership, but a frail one. Whether it is an attempt to relieve tension between a husband and wife or an extramarital affair, the circumstances and consequences that surround the action are always negative; in extreme cases, having sex with the wrong person or for the wrong reasons can even end with murder and suicide. An example of this outer violence is shown in "The Third Thing that Killed My Father Off," where Dummy murders his wife for cheating on him and then drowns himself in a fit of depression. The solace other characters are so often searching for is rarely found and when it is, its effects fail to be long-lasting. Arguably, sex is the most universal of all vices shown here. It permeates the media and the subconscious and, after all, every human is a product of it. What could be more relevant to a reader than quoting their basis for biological drive and existence?

Television as subconscious envy. Of the five vices that Carver utilizes most frequently in *What We Talk About*, television is certainly the most detached. It is not physically addictive and cannot relieve corporal stress or tension the way cigarettes, alcohol, or caffeine do, and there is a lack of the attempted intimacy and physicality that sex entails. And this is, I believe, why Carver branches away from the more tangible vices and includes the presence of a television set in several of his stories. There is a factor of escape when a television is present, as if one could jump into the frame and temporarily remove themselves from their current world. In this collection, television never plays a prominent role. It is mentioned briefly, as a passing detail, much like noting whether or not a light is on. These brief glimpses of the role of television in the lives of Carver's characters are almost metafictional; we glimpse them briefly glimpsing the lives of others. Television as it is used here is tied to the jealousy his characters feel for the lives that other people are leading. This jealousy is not entirely conscious, so the small way of mentioning its presence parallels admirably to the brief pulse or undercurrent role it plays.

In Marc Oxoby's article "The Voluminous Impact of Television in the Fiction of Raymond Carver," he discusses the role that television has for Carver's characters, noting "the TV, by its very presence, speaks volumes" and that "as an object it appears in Carver's short stories with a frequency at least equal to that of alcohol and cigarettes" (Kleppe 104). Its symbolic impact established, he then quotes Bill Mullen's idea that "while television does not provide a 'key' to understanding Carver's fiction, it may be read as a polyvalent sign in Carver's fiction that is important to its being readable as both formal minimalism and a variety of social realism in the tradition of working-class or proletariat writing" (qtd. in Kleppe 105). This is absolutely valid and certainly applies to the use of television in *What We Talk About* in particular. However, I would argue that the television's ability to "dull or eliminate awareness of

both class consciousness and class inequities” is actually more of a heightening awareness to this phenomenon. Through television, you can glimpse the lives that other people are leading; so while watching the screen may dull the mind and remove one’s focus from the present moment, it does not dull the consciousness that you are in a lesser societal position than those that you are watching. Especially if you are unhappy with your life, the subconscious desire to live someone else’s is fueled while escaping into the television for a while.

Coffee as comfort. Caffeine is another vice that Carver had personal ties to. In his essay “Bulletproof,” William Kittredge, an author and close personal friend of Carver’s, noted that his last memory of Carver before his death was “Ray [making] us some of his good coffee (he’d gone to coffee when he quit booze; coffee was one of his specialties)” (85). Even in the anecdote that follows – Kittredge remembering the way Carver told him of his painful and nearly unimaginable surgery for lung cancer – the reader can feel the soothing effect the coffee is meant to have. Coffee isn’t the only caffeinated beverage mentioned several times; tea is also a fixture in several stories. Although the beverage varies, the connotation that coffee and tea carry remains the same. They are soothing, or at least they attempt to be (in several cases, such as in the story “Sacks,” the relief isn’t effective enough and the drinkers progress gradually to mixed drinks with hard liquor).

Alcohol as destruction. Alcohol is easily the most prolific vice in this collection, appearing in more than half of the stories, and is yet another vice that Carver understood all too well. An alcoholic for a large part of his life, Carver finally quit drinking in 1977 after several devastating hospitalizations. In the foreword to a *Remembering Ray*, a collection of tributes to Carver after his death, editors Stull and Carroll note Carver’s feelings on this significant event:

For years before his death in August 1988, Raymond Carver spoke of having lived two lives. The date dividing them was June 2, 1977. On that day Carver, his first life laid waste by alcohol, took his final drink. After that, as he said in one of his last-written poems, “it was all gravy”: a ten-year second life of rising productivity, widening reputation, and sustaining love. (9)

It is clear from this and numerous other interviews and memoirs that alcohol was a major source of destruction and devastation in Carver’s life. This personal connection to alcohol holds symbolic significance and is manifested in his fiction. The universality of alcohol is also of consequence, as it exists all over, from cheap beer to the most expensive collectible liquors.

Nearly every story in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* incorporates the implication of one of these vices, and many notably integrate several at once. The misery of the characters in these stories is profound, especially when their circumstances are compounded with the symbolic. The use of vice in conjunction with their illustrated suffering paints a picture that the reader can ultimately empathize with on a personal level. One such story that succeeds at this symbolic unity is the first story in the collection, “Why Don’t You Dance?”

In “Why Don’t You Dance?” we first meet the main figure of the story, an unnamed man, as he is examining his home’s previous contents that are now sitting on the front lawn. He notices that except for the bed being unmade, “things looked much the way they had in the bedroom . . . He considered this as he sipped the whiskey” (3). As critic Ewing Campbell notes in his essay “Breakthrough: *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*,” this is one of only a handful of stories “that takes place after the storm” and not during it, in this case, “a tempest, a domestic storm that is inferable from the detritus” on the front lawn (43). The man, thinking of the woman who has obviously left him (he notes that the bed had “his side [and] her side” [3]), sips on his alcohol, no longer minding or paying attention to the destruction it will wreak. His casual way of consuming is almost as if shrugging and asking, “What more harm could be

done?” His desperation has reached as low as it could be and he is past the point of being able to care about what will happen to his life.

The next scene in this story unfolds as a boy and a girl, also unnamed, walk up to the debris on the lawn, assuming it to be a yard sale and wishing to purchase some of the items. The first item the boy considers is the man’s television: as he flips it on, you can almost see him envisioning the man’s life as his own, showing a subliminal envy for the life of a man with so many things. It is clear he is enamored with the life he is imagining as twice later in this story, he comments again about the television, once saying “It’s a pretty good TV” (6). Saltzman notes that as the young couple try out the television, they are performing “a rehearsal of the postures and affections they hope to suit to” it and other items on the front lawn (102). If one takes this into consideration, there is a sort of subconscious layering taking place: as the boy watches the man’s television, envious of the lives of others, he is already living out someone else’s life, as the television and the setting as a whole are borrowed. He is persuaded enough by the man’s things that he does end up purchasing much of what was on the front lawn, including the man’s bedroom set, desk, and record player with music. This subliminal jealousy for the man’s life shows that the boy truly fails to understand he is standing in the aftermath of a brutal breakdown. As Campbell notes, “It is the potential future for the boy and girl of this story” (44), but the boy avoids considering this possibility or voicing it aloud, so he lights a cigarette and lets his girlfriend do most of the haggling.

The man arrives fresh from the store with more alcohol and, as they haggle over prices, he offers them a drink. As they do not understand his situation, their consuming of his whiskey is symbolic of their unbeknownst absorption of his destructive tendencies, although the girl notably

asks for water in her whiskey, as if she's not ready for that destruction to run through her life yet undiluted.

The most poignant symbolic moment in this tale occurs when the man falls silent after haggling. He “gazed at the television. He finished his drink and started another. He reached to turn on the floor lamp. It was then that his cigarette dropped from his fingers and fell between the cushions” (7). In this moment, Carver synthesizes three of his five most common vices. As the man gazes at the television, envious of the lives of others, he drinks in an attempt to destroy his pain, but when he touches the floor lamp – which could only remind him of his estranged wife – he drops his cigarette, symbolically showing that he is unable to avoid thinking about her any longer. Critic Kirk Nessel notes quite accurately that “the young couple provides both an outlet through which the man may displace his denial . . . and a refiguration of his marriage in its infancy, the memory of which he is now attempting to cast off” (37). He has experienced where they are in life and knows what their future holds, and he knows he cannot stop the inevitable; so, rather than warn them, he allows them to live on happily, even giving (or selling to) them vices he knows they will need. These vices aid in demonstrating that the despair of the main character is the inevitable despair of the boy and girl in the story, and by extension, the inevitable despair of us all. This story is exemplary of a Carver-esque universal hopelessness.

Another short story in this collection that markedly ties together several vices and exemplifies despair is “Gazebo.” The story begins: “That morning she pours Teacher’s over my belly and licks it off. That afternoon she tries to jump out the window” (21). A pattern of destruction can already be seen developing, and the two continue drinking throughout. As the story unfolds, we learn that Duane, the narrator, cheated on his wife Holly with a cleaning woman at the hotel they manage together.

One morning I was doing a washer for one of the bathroom faucets, and [Juanita] comes in and turns on the TV as maids are like to do. While they clean, that is. I stopped what I was doing and stepped outside the bathroom. She was surprised to see me. She smiles and says my name. It was right after she said it that we got down on the bed. (23)

This is one of the more momentous uses of sex being borne of an irredeemable situation and having negative consequences. There are no emotions used to describe how or why Duane and Juanita had sex; this ambiguity makes it seem as if both of them were searching for some form of solace that neither had words for. In their desperation, they corroded the emotional ties of Duane and Holly's marriage. The placing of a television here is also significant. Duane wishes to explore something outside of his own life, and by turning the television on, Juanita allows him to get a glimpse of hers.

We can see the role of alcohol in this story as Duane reflects on its presence in his life with Holly, significantly remembering:

Drinking's funny. When I look back on it, all of our important decisions have been figured out when we were drinking. Even when we talked about having to cut back on our drinking, we'd be sitting at the kitchen table or out at the picnic table with a six-pack or whiskey. When we made up our minds to move down here and take this job as managers, we sat up a couple of nights drinking while we weighed the pros and the cons. (25)

Their current predicament affirms alcohol as a destructive agent in their lives. They can't sink much further, as their marriage is failing and their careers are about to end (and with that, their home and livelihood, as they live at the hotel they manage). The most terrible factor of their situation is that by liberally drinking, they have encouraged destruction to run rampant in their decisions and lives, and have no one to blame but themselves for their losses.

The reader can see dark undertones to the vices of sex and alcohol as briefly, Holly interrupts their conversation by bringing up Duane's adultery again in a rant: "She goes, 'Did you do it to her in this bed?' I don't have anything to say. I feel all out of words inside. I give her

the glass and sit down in the chair” (25). Even as he can feel the effects of his extramarital affair disintegrating his marriage, he remains a truly Carver character: he is unable to express himself except by handing his wife another drink.

A story in this collection that uses vice in a different way is “I Could See the Smallest Things.” The narrator Nancy wakes up because she hears her backyard gate unlatch. After looking out the window, she goes “to the kitchen and [makes] tea and [sits] with it at the kitchen table” while she smokes one of her husband’s cigarettes. She is afraid to go outside. When she eventually does, she sees her neighbor Sam is outside and then narrates some background on him: “Sam and Cliff [her husband] used to be friends. Then one night they got to drinking. They had words. The next thing, Sam had built a fence and Cliff built one too” (33). She notes the two have not spoken in a long while and the excessive fencing emphasizes this detachment. She then goes over to see what Sam is doing outside. As he demonstrates how slugs are killing his garden, he says, “Sometimes when I’m out here after the slugs, I’ll look over in your direction . . . I wish me and Cliff was friends again” (34). He then powders a slug with poison and tells Nancy with regards to his drinking, “I quit, you know. . . Had to. For a while it was getting so I didn’t know up from down. We still keep it around the house, but I don’t have much to do with it anymore” (35). Nancy just nods and says good night, but he calls her back briefly: “Listen . . . [t]ell Cliff I said hello” (35), and with that, they part ways for the evening.

What is so significant about this story is that not only is alcohol shown as destructive – it ruined the friendship of Cliff and Sam to the point of each of them needing their own fence, as well as destroyed various aspects of Sam’s life – but a preferred lack thereof is shown to be healing. Sam’s words are direct; he misses his friendship with Cliff and explicitly says that he wants to renew what was destroyed. His actions are just as significant as his words. By taking

control of his life and controlling his alcoholism, he has begun to kill the metaphorical slugs – those destructive and distracting catalysts of despair in his life. It is not an easy task; he notes “I have to keep at this to just come close to staying up with them” (34), but by speaking to Nancy he comes closer to healing old wounds, and Carver demonstrates this by showing Sam successfully killing and scooping up a dead slug after he admits that he misses his friendship with Clifford. His parting note of friendliness towards Cliff, even as simple as telling him hello, is the beginning of a healed life. This is one of only a handful of stories in Carver’s collection where there is a glimmer of hope at the end of a devastating tunnel.

Carver is quick to let his reader know that this perceived optimism is temporary, however, and follows “I Could See the Smallest Things” with “Sacks,” a frame story in which the characters in each frame get progressively more miserable because of a father’s adultery. Obviously, sex plays a large role here, but all five vices are mentioned at least briefly. The narrator Les is sitting in an airport with his father, whom he hasn’t seen since he divorced his mother, and his father is trying to explain what happened. Les asks, “[a] drink or a cup of coffee?” (38) and they decide on drinks and cigarettes, as if coffee’s effects are not enough for the tension the two obviously feel. His father begins his explanation for adultery with, “I liked to have died over it” (39) and Les immediately picks up and examines an ashtray; interestingly, his avoidance is not linked to the cigarettes directly, but the receptacle for its ashes. He then begrudgingly listens as his father recounts his affair with a door-to-door Stanley Products woman; the first time they met, their conversation was sparked by talking about what they would do with the money from a “holdup back East” (40) where thieves got away clean with bank robbery. The woman noted “I saw it on the TV last night” (40). A television, though not directly in the present setting, still plays a large role in the two characters feeling jealous for the lives of

others and they discuss where they would live and what they would buy if they, too, got away with theft. One thing leads to another, and they share cigarettes and a pot of coffee and eventually have sex on the couch. The woman's only reaction is, "You must think I'm a whore or something" (43) and she then leaves. Everyone in the story is negatively affected. Les's mother is upset enough to divorce his father; his father ruins not only his own marriage, but the marriage of the Stanley Products woman; and Les, without a proper template for a successful marriage, is unable to maintain happiness in his own (he notes that although he forgot sweets he was given for his wife on airport counter, that it doesn't matter, as she doesn't need them; he insinuates his unhappiness with her physical form and demeanor).

Carver synthesizes all five vices in this tale, one vice leading into the use of another. While you can smoke cigarettes to avoid thinking about temptation or drink coffee as a means of comforting one another from tension, eventually your subconscious drive to explore the lives of other people can lead to sex and then, in an attempt to destroy your memories or yourself, to alcohol. Despair truly begets despair in this tale in a cycle of vices that cannot right itself.

In "The Bath," Carver takes a different direction with regard to how vice is perceived. It is more feeble and ineffective in this tale than in any other. This story begins with a mother choosing a birthday cake for her son, Scotty. The baker with whom she speaks is brief: "No pleasantries, just this small exchange, the barest information, nothing that was not necessary" (48). His character is intimidating and unfriendly. Later, Scotty is hit by a car while walking to school and falls into a coma. His parents wait up for hours at the hospital; his father decides to head home to take a bath and as he walks through the front door, the phone rings. Thinking it is an update on Scotty's condition, he hurriedly answers:

“I just got in the door!”

“There’s a cake that wasn’t picked up.” This is what the voice on the other end said.

“What are you saying?” the father said.

“The cake,” the voice said. “Sixteen dollars.”

The husband held the receiver against his ear, trying to understand. He said, “I don’t know anything about it.”

“Don’t hand me that,” the voice said. (49)

The father then hangs up, pours himself a glass of whiskey, and gets into the tub as the phone rings again. He rushes to answer it and the voice on the other line only says, “It’s ready” (50). He hangs up yet again and makes his way back to the hospital and switch places with his wife. She comes home and the first thing she does is make tea. The telephone rings:

“Yes!” she said. “Hello!” she said.

“Mrs. Weiss,” a man’s voice said.

“Yes,” she said. “This is Mrs. Weiss. Is it about Scotty?” she said.

“Scotty,” the voice said. “It is about Scotty,” the voice said. “It has to do with Scotty, yes.” (56)

Carver ambiguously ends this story here, neither the whiskey nor the tea helping either parent in an emotional way. We never learn the outcome of their son’s predicament, indicating that this story isn’t about him: it is about Scotty’s parents, their grief and their coping mechanisms.

The father’s choice of whiskey and the mother’s choice of tea demonstrate an interesting gender difference in Carver’s story. As critic Kirk Nessel notes in his book *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study*, Carver tends to show that men are a more vulnerable and weaker species than women are (11). The choice of vice in this desperate hour does seem to reflect this notion; the man chooses what will potentially help him temporarily but will inevitably harm others, whereas the woman chooses tea, to soothe her and physically ready her for another long day at the hospital. There seems to be a certain strength of character in her choice of vice, its effects having more of a selfless outcome.

With different vices, each of Scotty's parents attempts to resolve their current emotional breakdown, but the baker's phone calls leave them unable to rest. These haunting messages that do not cease demonstrate Carver's idea that no matter what you do, there will be voices that cannot understand your situation, only their own. The baker represents a sort of outside viewer who doesn't understand nor care about Scotty's terrible predicament: his suffering is worth less to the baker than sixteen dollars. This us-versus-them mentality goes far in describing the largely ignored and unresolved suffering of a lower class.

"Tell the Women We're Going" is a striking example of vice leading to violence in this collection. It begins with describing the infallible friendship of Bill and Jerry, being connected by their affinity to "bang" the same women and drink copiously together (57). They are consistently in each other's lives, be it sharing a car to drive around in, being best man at each other's wedding, or working together. One day after a barbecue with their families, Jerry gets the itch to get out of the house and they head to a local tavern. Casual sexuality unmistakably permeates the atmosphere when they talk to the bartender, Riley: "So how you boys doing? . . . You boys getting any on the side? Jerry, the last time I seen you, your old lady was six months gone" (61). He fixes them drinks and Jerry comments, "'What kind of place is this, Riley, that it don't have any girls on a Sunday afternoon?' Riley laughed. He said, 'I guess they're all in church praying for it'" (61). This off-color perspective continues as the drunken friends leave the bar and go for a country drive. They pass two girls on bicycles and Jerry comments, "I could use some of that" (62). They agree to chase them for a while, Bill being passive in an attempt to please his friend and Jerry being overly aggressive, even divvying out the girls: "'I'll take the brunette,' [Jerry] said. 'The little one's yours'" (62). They pull ahead and wait for the girls where they think they will be headed, Jerry notably saying, "Wish we had a beer now . . . I sure could

go for a beer” (65). This small mention of alcohol foreshadows the destructive event about to take place. The girls arrive and as they crouch behind a rock, Bill tries to light a cigarette, “[b]ut he could not get it lit” (66); symbolically, Bill cannot avoid the violence about to take place:

Bill had just wanted to fuck. Or even to see them naked. On the other hand, it was okay with him if it didn't work out.

He never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock. Jerry used the same rock on both girls, first on the girl called Sharon and then on the one that was supposed to be Bill's. (66)

In this story, the destructive qualities of alcohol lend themselves to generating harmful sexual impulses. The overtly masculine perspective of women being sexual objects, not to mention the embracing of adultery, is very obviously condemned by Carver in this piece. The only characters explicitly harmed in this story are women; Jerry and Bill's wives have been cheated on, whether they know it or not, and the two innocent girls on bikes are dead. The vices of alcohol and sex can only generate despair in the lives of women.

After this outward violence, Carver follows with “After the Denim,” a tale focused on displacement and inner turmoil. The scene opens with Edith Packer listening to a tape cassette, reading a magazine, smoking a cigarette, and watching the television on mute (67). Her multitasking seems to pull her in several different directions of distraction, and Carver's inclusion of a television tips the reader off that she may need an outlet of escape. Her husband walks into the room and, seeing the television is on, quickly flips it off. This one small gesture is as though he is trying to ground her, to remove her desires to be somewhere or someone else.

The story continues as the Packers go to a bingo hall, and everywhere they go it seems as though another young couple, dressed all in denims, has usurped their lives somehow. They take their usual parking spot; they sit in their regular seats in the bingo hall; and they win bingo several times just before one of the Packers is about to. James and Edith Packer smoke liberally

throughout this story and there are undertones of darkness which make the reader feel as if they are missing something. Finally, it is revealed that Edith's poor health problems have returned, and they decide to head home. While Edith busies herself with household chores, James sits down and turns on the television, a reversal from his previous actions. When she walks into the room, "James [concentrates] his attention on the TV" (76), her mere presence pulling him away from his escape into a world where his wife could be healthy again.

After a time, no longer able to watch television, he turns it off and sits thinking of the young couple:

He smoked and thought of that sauntering, arrogant gait as the two of them moved just ahead. If only they knew . . . He'd set those floozies straight! He'd tell them what was waiting for you after the denim and the earrings, after touching each other and cheating at games. (77)

What is waiting for them – poor health, an unfulfilled life, unfair circumstances – is all that he wishes he could escape. Although other vices are present, television plays the greatest role here both as a catalyst for escape and for a subconscious desire but inevitably, James knows that it's not enough to be able to escape. You must live your life, miserable and unfair as it may be, and his inarticulateness makes him unable to tell that to the young, happy couple. Although he knows what is coming, he cannot make his despair influence their future. The story ends with James sitting in bed performing needlework, his isolation allowing the reader to connect with his hopelessness.

"A Serious Talk" is a story that exemplifies the negative effects that vice can have on a predominantly inarticulate person. Like "Why Don't You Dance?" it begins with an after-the-storm setting. Burt and his wife Vera are estranged and although we are never shown precisely why, he secures an invitation to dine with her and their children for a pre-Christmas evening. As

Burt sits on the couch drinking, presents are opened, the ones he gives being much nicer than the ones he receives (a gift certificate, a comb, and a ballpoint pen). He continues to sit as his wife and daughter set the table for Vera's new man and his children. The images of his family ignoring him and preparing dinner for another man are too much for Burt to take. He grabs every log the house has and shoves them into the fireplace before leaving, taking every pie Vera has made with him, "one for every ten times she had ever betrayed him" (107). He effectively destroys their evening and leaves wordlessly.

Burt returns the following day wanting to apologize. Vera initially won't let him in the house:

She said, "I can't take any more. You tried to burn the house down."

"I did not."

"You did. Everybody here was a witness."

He said, "Can I come in and talk about it?" (108)

Her directness clashes with his indirectness and Burt's failure to communicate with her, even over simple truths. She allows him in and although he says he wants to apologize, he never does. He asks for a glass of vodka and sits silently at the kitchen table while she gets ready to leave. Her boyfriend then calls the house and after listening in to hear who it is, Burt decided to end her phone call by sawing through the phone cord with a knife, mirroring his own inability to communicate. Vera's reaction is to scream at him and as he leaves, throwing things at his retreating figure.

He was not certain, but he thought he had proved something. He hoped he had made something clear. The thing was, they had to have a serious talk soon. There were things that needed talking about, important things that had to be discussed. (112-113).

The alcohol that Burt has liberally consumed further breaks down his ability to communicate with his wife and encourages the destruction of her house. He never does

apologize or have that “serious talk” he had intended. Nonverbally, a message is sent loud and clear, but it is not the message that Burt intended. His misery at being abandoned by his wife and children effectively mutes him, and his despair is never alleviated, only spreading to others like the fire he set in his previous home. The vice of alcohol pushes him to devastation twice in this tale and demonstrates a truly Carver-esque faltering of communication in one’s hour of despair.

A story that demonstrates how sex even between a married couple can be corrosive to emotions is “So Much Water So Close to Home.” It begins in media res with the narrator, Claire, being upset with her husband Stuart because while he was on a fishing trip with his friends, they found a dead body and did not immediately go for help. For unclear reasons, Claire connects this dead girl’s forgotten body with a memory from her childhood. After Stuart comes home, Claire awakens to find him in the kitchen:

I found him leaning against the refrigerator with a can of beer. He put his heavy arms around me and rubbed his big hands on my back. In bed he put his hands on me again and then waited as if thinking of something else. I turned and opened my legs.

Afterwards, I think he stayed awake. (82)

There are no mentions of love or intimacy in their relations. They are simply doing what is physical, and its effects take a toll on Claire’s emotions. Afterwards, she finds a note in the kitchen from her husband, signed “Love,” and she leaves her coffee cup on it to make a ring, not bothering to trust or savor the emotion (84).

Claire’s inarticulateness is palpable as she tries to explain to the hairdresser what happened. She then goes to the dead woman’s funeral, despite not knowing her, and is still unsure of how to feel about the situation. Notably, she seems to feel more connected to the dead woman than she does to her own husband. When she comes home, Stuart tells her that he knows

what she needs, and begins to unbutton her jacket and her blouse. She seems emotionally blank towards him but responds, “That’s right . . . before Dean comes. Hurry” (88). Above all others in this collection, sex in this story demonstrates the loneliness of each character, and the solace they cannot seem to find in one another’s physical company.

We write what we know. This is a simple mantra, but a true one, and no one understood this quite like Raymond Carver. What is so significant about Carver is that he took what he knew – the people, the places, the objects, and the emotions – and he manifested them in his fiction in such a way that anyone could feel their weight and their significance. No matter where you are from or what socioeconomic background you are familiar with, you can recognize the vices of his characters and feel the despair and desolation as they feel it. Once you read and understand Carver’s fiction, you are granted access to his Carver Country, where every reader can begin to understand one another and is closer in proximity because of that understanding. Once in his world, yours is greatly expanded. Empathy is a powerful tool in literature, but its command in the fiction of Raymond Carver truly cannot be matched.

Works Cited

Campbell, Ewing. "Breakthrough: *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*." *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1992.

Campbell uses this essay to discuss Hemingway's "iceberg principle" in relation to Carver's fiction in *What We Talk About*. Campbell closely examines this principle by looking at multiple drafts and edits of several stories, including "Sacks," "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off," "So Much Water So Close to Home," "Gazebo," "Why Don't You Dance?," and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." The author pinpoints symbols, domestic situations, themes, and tone in each story and discusses the significance of each.

Campbell, Ewing. "An Interview with Raymond Carver." *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1992.

In the short preface to a lengthy interview with Carver, Campbell notes several significant traits in Carver's work; one of these is how "commonplace objects – a broken refrigerator, a car, a cigarette, a bottle of beer or whiskey – become transformed in Carver's hands from realistic props in realistic stories to powerful, emotionally charged signifiers in and of themselves" (98). Campbell also chronicles the changes in Carver's unique voice, from a "stark, yet intense" beginning with a "pared-down" style to the "less bleak" style of later works like *Cathedral*. In the interview itself, Carver discusses what he views as the two separate sections of his life: before and after quitting drinking, and the emotional effect he believed these stages had on his writing. He discusses different versions of his short stories (notably never mentioning Lish's name) and blames himself for the sparseness of re-edited and republished stories like "A Small, Good Thing" ("The Bath"). With regards to editing, he says "it was the most natural thing in the world for me to go back and refine what was happening on the page and eliminate the padding" (108). Interestingly, he notes that he views poetry and short stories as more similar than short stories and novels (105). Responding to the note that his objects are signifiers, Carver notes that objects in a story can't just sit there; they need to "connect to the lives around them" (106).

Carver, Raymond. "Beginners" TS. *The New Yorker Online* (2007). 4 March 2011.

This primary source, a previously unpublished copy of Carver's story "Beginners," is an earlier version of the story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." It is very helpful in describing the types and volume of editorial cuts that Gordon Lish made to Carver's work.

Carver, Raymond. *Carver Country: the World of Raymond Carver*. Comp. Bob Adelman. New York: Scribner, 1990.

In her introduction to this book, Tess Gallagher, Carver's widow, discusses why and how she and Bob Adelman composed this book of clips from Carver's short stories, essays, and poetry, as well as many photographs of his work space and drafts. Gallagher argues that Carver's readership composes "Carver Country," a place where there is a mutual understanding of his readership.

Carver, Raymond. *Fires*. Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1983.

The foreword for his book of essays, poems, and stories is an introductory essay "On Writing." In it Carver begins by explaining his impatience for long narrative fiction and his affinity for poems and short stories because of his philosophy: "Get in, get out. Don't linger. Go on" (13). He describes the talents and successes of other authors who manage to create their own believable worlds, like Ann Beattie, John Updike, and William Faulkner. He then details the importance of laying your story out bare for the reader to experience, with the advice of "no tricks. Period" (14). "Writers don't need tricks or gimmicks or even necessarily need to be the smartest fellows on the block," Carver writes. "At the risk of appearing foolish, a writer sometimes needs to be able to just stand and gape at this or that thing – a sunset or an old shoe – in absolute and simple amazement" (14). This affinity for "things" continues on, and Carver explains, "It's possible . . . to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power" (15). Carver was not immune, even with his economical style of writing, to the power of symbols and the effect they can have on the reader. He concludes with the importance of precise language: "If the words are heavy with the writer's own unbridled emotions, or if they are imprecise and inaccurate for some other reason – if the words are in any way blurred – the reader's eyes will slide right over them and nothing will be achieved" (16). "Clear and precise language," his tools for his trade, "can be so precise they may even sound flat, but they can still carry; if used right, they can hit all the notes" (18). Here, Carver has described his sparse style of writing simply accurately.

Carver, Raymond. Letter to Gordon Lish. 10 May 1980. *The New Yorker Online*. 4 December 2007. 2 March 2011.

Carver, Raymond. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.

Carver's 17 short fiction stories are the basis for my close reading of symbolism in his writing. With the use of common vices in American households such as television, alcohol (beer and hard liquor), caffeine and cigarettes, Carver exemplifies the importance of symbolic material objects in his writing and their outreach to a world community.

Oxoby, Marc. "The Voluminous Impact of Television in the Fiction of Raymond Carver."

Kleppe, Sandra Lee, and Robert Miltner, eds. *New Paths to Raymond Carver: Critical Essays on His Life, Fiction, and Poetry*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2008. Noting that television is rarely a driving force in Carver's fiction, Oxoby details in this essay how despite its minimal mention, television plays a more significant role in Carver's fiction than previous critics have given credit for. Notably quoting the television's presence in stories such as "After the Denim" and "Why Don't You Dance?" he explores some potential meanings and implications of this widely-known and utilized household object.

Kittredge, William. "Bulletproof." Stull, William L., and Maureen P. Carroll, eds. *Remembering Ray: a Composite Biography of Raymond Carver*. Santa Barbara: Capra, 1993.

Kittredge's personal narrative describes the intimate friendship he and Carver has, remembering several anecdotes of their times together. He contrasts their lively youth with the memory of his last visit to Carver on his deathbed, as Carver attempted to comfort him with nonchalance and coffee.

Leypoldt, Gunter. "Reconsidering Raymond Carver's 'Development': The Revisions of 'So Much Water So Close to Home'." *Contemporary Literature Magazine* Vol. 43, No. 2., University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

In this article, Leypoldt discusses the several published and unpublished versions of Carver's story, "So Much Water So Close to Home." His general argument is that "the stability of meaning in the longer version has been as much exaggerated as it has been underestimated in the shorter one" (323), and he notes that despite the longer story's digressions and longer physical descriptions, it should still be classified in a minimalist genre, somewhere between neorealism and experimentalism.

Nesset, Kirk. "The Power of Style in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*." *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1995.

In this critical review of Carver's work, Nesset begins by addressing the economy of words and prose style that Carver was famous for, noting that Carver acknowledged, then rejected, the idea of being "minimalist." He, like Saltzman's article, notes several unimpressive nicknames for the genre and for Carver's writing as a whole. He then goes through each of Carver's stories in this collection, looking in particular at symbolism and syntax and noting how it relates to the characters' despair.

"Rough Crossings: The Cuttings of Raymond Carver." *The New Yorker Online* (2007). 4 March 2011.

In this online article, several letters from Carver to Lish and vice versa are quoted in an attempt to define their complicated editor/friend relationship. Also discussed are the multitude of editorial cuts Lish made to Carver's manuscripts and speculations about Lish's intentions for doing so.

Saltzman, Arthur M. "Connoisseur of the Commonplace." *Understanding Raymond Carver*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1988.

In this essay, which is both biographical and critical, Saltzman discusses Carver's background as a prominent inspiration for his fiction, primarily for the character development that occurs in his short stories. Working many blue-collar jobs and being the son of that atmosphere, Saltzman pins Carver's experiences on his ability to write about and also for the sort of people he is familiar with. Saltzman then discusses the criticisms against both minimalism and Carver's version of it, defending Carver's style, as it "does retain a concern with the intricacies of craft" (7). He also discusses Carver's position as a writer in a "post-postmodern" genre and his concerns with, and triumphs over, the struggle for "humanness" (18).

Saltzman, Arthur M. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." *Understanding Raymond Carver*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1988.

Saltzman's discussion of Carver's narratives differs from Campbell's because he focuses not on multiple drafts of stories Carver has republished here, but on stories that were newly published when *What We Talk About* came out in 1981. He discusses plot structure, potential symbolism, character interaction and the devastating role of poverty and blue-collar accommodations in "Why Don't You Dance?," "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit," "Gazebo," "I Could See the Smallest Things," "The Bath," "Tell the Women We're Going," "After the Denim," and "What We Talk About."

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

In the same collection that published Kittredge's essay "Bulletproof," editors Stull and Carroll write a foreword about Carver's early life and reputation versus his later success. Notably, they describe how Carver felt he had two distinct lives; one before, and one after joining Alcoholics Anonymous and quitting drinking, quoting how Carver said after that, it was "all gravy."