

LITERARY CRITIQUE

## WHEN “BEGINNINGS” MEAN THE END

*The tragic predictability of Raymond Carver.*

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If you’ve read one of Carver’s stories, you’ve read them all. Although he crafts them well, reading through the shattered remnants of a boarder-line alcoholic, middle-class, white male for the third time in a row does get a little dull. Similar plots, identical themes and language that, if paid much attention to, is excessively wordy and descriptive—that’s ‘Why Don’t You Dance’ (Carver 2009, 1-6), ‘Viewfinder’ (Carver 2009, 7-10) and ‘Pie’ (Carver 2009, 151-158) in a nutshell. To his credit, Carver does occasionally attempt to alter his voice, at least, in other works; in ‘So Much Water So Close to Home’ (Carver 2009, 114) Carver lasts a whole paragraph writing in a convincing female voice, but eventually the “tragic white male” takes over. It seems, as he admitted to his once editor, Gordon Lish, that Raymond Carver’s stories are ‘too close’ to his own ‘fragile’ state of mind (Carver 2007).

So why should you even bother reading his work? The balance created between story tension and character introduction is a truly admirable experiment. Where many writers wouldn’t run the risk of implying tension that pre-exists the story itself, Carver jumps straight in and sign-posts it with his character’s actions. ‘[Max] poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard’ (Carver 2009, 1)—this narrational intrusion sets the scene for ‘Why Don’t You Dance’ but does so leaving enough information out, implying a sense of bewilderment; a tragic shock,

which is felt at the end of a relationship. This immediate theme introduction creates unease in readers, an effect Stull describes 'an iceberg' (Powell 1994). Sensing that 'seven-eighths [of the story's conflict is] submerged' (Powell 1994), readers are encouraged to read on.

Powell (1994) agrees that this underlying 'sense of menace' is achieved throughout Carver's work by 'leaving out, or by providing only clues to, crucial aspects of the story'. In 'Viewfinder', Carver presents a dual/multiple structured story by weaving the lives of two men together. While mentioning these two separate lives works together to create one main plot (and introduce the typical "Carver themes") the 'man without hands' alerts readers to the fact that there is 'another story' they are missing out on (Carver 2009). This is also true of 'Why Don't You Dance'; where Max's story is coming to an end; Jack and Carla's exposition begins, meets him in the middle and then completely abandons him in the end. Mixing structures like this (dual/multiple and discontinuous), Carver's stories effectively reveal 'the very core of human emotion' (Carver 2009).

Despite his habitual, implicit foreshadowing, the interest of Carver's readers is maintained with the battle between character interaction, internal monologue and character description. These elements set up a kind of second tension which doesn't ever eventuate. Most obvious through the silenced interaction of Carla and Max in 'Why don't you dance' (Carver 2009, 5), this disappointing, anti-climax is featured also in "Pie". The reality that Burt does not '[make] it clear that he still love[s] [Vera]' (Carver 2009, 158) is communicated so powerfully through the switch from tense

dialogue to unstable-minded monologue, yet it seems a shame that nothing ever eventuates from the foreshadowed notion of a physical fight.

Much debate has occurred over whether 'The Real Carver' is expansive or minimalist (Rich 2007). The former mentioning of his structural emissions suggests Carver is minimalist; however examination of his narrational exposition encourages an entirely different view. When "'Beginners,' Edited' (Lish 2007) was released, Carver fans were in uproar about the extent to which Lish edited the author's work and critics, such as Gary Fisketjon, were viewed as unreasonable for refusing to republish it without the Lish editions (Rich 2007). Admittedly, changing character names from Herb to Mel may be taking the role of "editor" a little far (Lish 2007), however, the alternate 'fleshier stories' (Carver 2009) did often benefit from Lish's information cull.

Tess Gallagher, states that Carver's work has 'always been expansive' (Rich 2007). In 'Why Don't You Dance', this characteristic is strangely both detrimental and beneficial to the story. Controlling the pace in a scene/real time ratio, dialogue and narrational exposition not only introduce the structure of the story (clarifying the connection between the characters) but also display inconsistencies in Carver's prose and emphasise his unnecessary repetition. The mixture of sparse descriptions such as 'things worked', coupled with the more verbose: 'night stand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, a nightstand and reading lamp on her side,' (Carver 2009, 1) compounds these inconsistencies and suggests juvenile, unedited writing. Despite situating such lines in the middle of a clunky, scene-setting info-dump, Carver

appears to suggest this juvenile style is intentional; the dialogue which follows shortly after is stereotypical, yet symbolic of youthful characters.

Unfortunately, identical info-dumps continue throughout the body of Carver's collected short stories. 'Viewfinder' goes into excruciating, unnecessary detail about the way the '[the man without hands] used the camera' and continues to describe the 'tragedy' of a yard with 'a little rectangle of lawn, the driveway, carport, front steps, bay window, kitchen window' (Carver 2009, 7). It seems a shame to mix such beautiful, elusive dialogue with this boring detail; almost as if Carver only half trusts readers to pick up on the information he had intentionally not told. In this mixed state, Carver's stories appear undecided and the forced detail interferes with the images readers may have already conjured up in their minds.

Dialogue appears to be the only redeeming element in these shattered remains of 'narrative silences' and seamlessly paced plots (Carver 2009). By incorporating the subtle change between 'the girl said'/'the boy said' and 'she said'/'he said', Carver draws parallels within the lives of his characters. As the young couple in "Why Don't You Dance" become more comfortable in the yard house, and imitate the implied relationship once held by Max, Carver changes his dialogue to also imitate the '*his* side, *her* side' (Carver 2009) nature of the, now non-existent, relationship. This heightens the 'iceberg' (Powell 1994) mood of the piece, once again suggesting the tension that initiated the circumstances of this story.

It would be unfair to imply that, because the literary techniques within three randomly selected stories happen to be the same, all of Raymond Carver's work is the

same. The New York Times claim that his stories can ‘be counted amongst the masterpieces of American fiction’ (Carver 2009) and the views of his critics are ‘marked by an astonishing absence of consensus’ (Leypoldt 2001), however, it is an undeniable fact that his work just doesn’t change. Examining short stories edited and published by different people and at different times, the same voice and themes remain ever-present. ‘Are These Actual Miles’ expresses, in painfully typical, long-winded description, the hopeless lives of yet another unhappy couple (Martin 2010). The disjointed, conversational language is identical to that in ‘Why Don’t You Dance’ and ‘Viewfinder’. Common American exclamations and colloquial terms such as “Screw it” (Carver 2009, 10); “I think it’s near Jimmy’s” (Martin 2010); and referring to ‘Jell-O’ (Carver 2009, 7) and the legal drinking age (Carver 2009, 3), do justify the ‘masterpiece’ status of Carver’s work, however also narrows his readership even further.

The similarities between the tell-all conversations in ‘Are these actual Miles’ and ‘Pie’ (“I’ll have to have dinner or something, I told you that already...” (Martin 2010, 146) and “I’ve had it, Burt. You literally tried to burn the house down last night.” (Carver 2009, 152)) indicate that Carver’s body of work lacks growth. Thematic repetition makes his work similar to that of genre-fiction and it seems to only cater for a very specific audience. In a once-off read the bizarre situations his despairing protagonists inevitably find themselves in is amusing, however, the predictability of his work quickly becomes tiresome. Overall, reading more too much of Raymond Carver in one sitting can leave a reader feeling blank—the beautifully subtle emotion is undercut by such bulky narration that it is hard to decide whether to

feel sympathetic or confused. Carver's work risky and technically experimental...but there comes a point when an author should recognise the limits of their experiments.