
From the Instructor

In “Alcohol, Emotion, and Tension in Raymond Carver’s Fiction,” Sara Kornfeld Simpson writes about the complicated relationship between alcohol and emotion in the short fiction of Raymond Carver. The final segment of our class focused on *Cathedral*, Carver’s fourth and best-known collection. Many students and professional critics have read the collection, the scholarship, and the biographical information, and have come to the conclusion that the movement from alcoholism toward sobriety that is an important pattern in the book is Carver’s clear-cut statement on alcohol: the failure, loss, and emotional disconnection of “Chef’s House” to the recovery and improved communication of “Where I’m Calling From” to the emotional connection and enlightenment of “Cathedral,” Carver’s most famous short story.

Sara Kornfeld Simpson was not satisfied with that reading and decided to dig deeper, including going back to “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” the title story of Carver’s previous collection. She discovered that alcohol is functioning in a more complex and “paradoxical” way here and elsewhere, and that alcohol and its more complex depiction is a key to the emotional content of Carver’s fiction—emotion that is always in tension, and in relentless motion. Simpson discovered that Carver saw alcohol as a powerful and mysterious element that could enhance lives as well as destroy them, foster communication as well as silence or distort it.

Simpson argues an original and well-motivated claim through a wonderfully close, perceptive reading of four of Carver’s best-known stories, and she balances that reading with careful and astute engagement with a wide range of secondary sources, including Carver’s own essays and interviews, Carver scholarship, and critical essays from other points in the course—a truly successful capstone essay for WR 100.

— Anthony Wallace

WR 100: The American Short Story: Tradition and Evolution

From the Writer

This was my final paper from WR 100 “The American Short Story.” The centrality of alcohol in Raymond Carver’s short stories drove me to reflect on its relationship to their mounting, if often sub-surface, emotional tension. Initially viewing alcohol as a recurring “menace” for this alcoholic author, I gradually uncovered a complex paradox: alcohol’s effectiveness as a social lubricant often left characters slipping and sliding socially and emotionally, for good or ill. Finally, I strove to place my ideas within the context of literary criticism, an important method I learned in WR 100 and 150. This allowed me to connect Carver with his model, Ernest Hemingway, and to join a larger scholarly conversation.

— Sara Kornfeld Simpson

SARA KORNFELD SIMPSON

ALCOHOL, EMOTION, AND TENSION IN RAYMOND CARVER'S FICTION

In “The Art of Evasion,” Leon Edel complains that Ernest Hemingway’s fiction evades emotion by featuring superficial characters who drink: “In Hemingway’s novels people order drinks—they are always ordering drinks—then they drink, then they order some more . . . it is a world of superficial action and almost wholly without reflection” (Edel 170). If Edel fails to recognize the deep emotional tension in Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” where one of the characters reflects critically, “that’s all we do isn’t it—look at things and try new drinks” (211), then one can only imagine the qualms he would have with Raymond Carver’s stories. As Charles May notes in “Do You See What I’m Saying?: The Inadequacy of Explanation and the Uses of Story in the Short Fiction of Raymond Carver,” literary “critics often complain that there is no depth in Carver, that his stories are all surface detail” (49). A self-avowed “fan of Ernest Hemingway’s short stories” (“Fires” 19), Carver also saturates his stories with alcohol; his characters often consume inordinate amounts of alcohol and generally struggle with emotional expression. Do Carver’s inebriated and/or alcoholic characters drink to evade emotional connections? Is his fictional world superficial and devoid of tension?

Carver’s critical essays suggest a radically alternative approach to these issues. In “On Writing,” Carver insists that in a short story, “what creates tension . . . is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it’s also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things” (17). This suggests that critics who respond solely to the characters’ consumption of alcohol to blunt

or evade emotion on the “surface of things” miss much of the emotional tension created or revealed by alcohol underneath the “visible action” of the story. In the same essay, Carver notes, “I like it when there is some feeling of threat or sense of menace in short stories . . . There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent” (17). This essay will explore the many levels on which alcohol functions to enhance emotional expression and to create tension, a “sense of menace,” in four of Carver’s short stories. Analyzing the relationship between alcohol, emotion, and tension provides a key to the central conflict in these stories, for alcohol consumption is usually parallel and proportional to the rising action, leading to the stories’ most emotionally profound climaxes. Alcohol often acts as a social lubricant, creating emotional bonds among strangers or acquaintances, releasing the characters’ inhibitions and allowing them to reveal their deep fears and tensions in the stories they tell in their drunken state. Paradoxically, however, the characters’ loss of control while under the influence of alcohol can also menace or destroy emotional bonds, relationships, and even bodies and lives. The mysterious, inescapable, paradoxical power of alcohol pervades Raymond Carver’s fiction, shaping and complicating his characters’ identities, relationships, and lives.

In “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” alcohol serves as a social lubricant that diminishes inhibitions, which allows hidden tensions and emotions to emerge. On the surface, this is a story of two couples drinking gin and talking about love by telling stories. As Charles May explains, through their stories the characters “encounter those most basic mysteries of human experience that cannot be explained by rational means” (40), including the intricate connection between love and violence. Mel’s wife, Terri, reveals that “the man she lived with before she lived with Mel loved her so much he tried to kill her” (138). This inner story drives tension within the larger story by uncovering a hidden strain between Terri and Mel. Terri begs, “He did love me though Mel. Grant me that . . . he was willing to die for it” (140). After undergoing such trauma, she must cling to this view in order to cope. But Mel refuses her this, saying “I sure as hell wouldn’t call it love” (142); he too claims ownership of the story because Terri’s first husband had threatened his life several times. As Mel imbibes, he becomes less playful, less eager to reconcile their difference, and the tension mounts. Once intoxicated, Mel’s “concrete words” reflect

a complete lack of inhibition, as he tells Terri to “just shut up for once in your life” (146). The tension between them is unmasked as alcohol mediates between their outer and inner lives, revealing the opposing emotions warring “just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface” of their complex relationship (“On Writing” 17).

As he drinks, Mel becomes more and more loquacious, gradually revealing his deep fears about the impermanence of love—and the permanence of death. At the beginning of the story, when he is sober, Mel insists that “real love is nothing less than spiritual love” (137), but later he asks, “What do any of us really know about love? . . . It seems to me we’re just beginners at love” (144). He now defines love as “physical” and “sentimental,” and no longer uses the word “spiritual;” he begins favoring *cupiditas* over *caritas*. Ultimately, the purpose of Mel’s monologue is to come to terms with the fleeting nature of love and life. Freed of all of his inhibitions by alcohol, Mel reveals his true, bleak, frightening perception of love: “if something happened to one of us tomorrow, I think the other one, the other person, would grieve for a while, you know, but then the surviving party would go out and love again, have someone else soon enough. All this, all of this love we’re talking about, it would just be a memory” (145). This concept of ephemeral love differs markedly from the permanence, profoundness, and eternal devotion associated with spiritual love, and is drawn forth from Mel as a result of his drunkenness. Although Mel insists that he is sober, that “I don’t have to be drunk to say what I think. I mean, we’re all just talking, right?” (145), he actually does need alcohol to say what he really thinks. As a result of his drunkenness, we are exposed to a tension within him as he struggles with his idealized and realistic concepts of love, as well as with the terror of impermanence and death.

Mel acknowledges his own confusion about love as he introduces the other story-within-the-story, but has great difficulty conveying the emotional meaning of this story because alcohol progressively blurs his speech and thought processes. Mel, a cardiologist, recounts an old couple’s struggle to survive after a drunk driver runs into their camper. He cannot finish his story because alcohol has robbed him of coherence. His language, the “concrete word,” becomes crude and vulgar as he tries to prove his point about true love: “Even after he found out that his wife was going to pull through, he was still very depressed . . . I’m telling you, the man’s heart was

breaking because he couldn't turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife . . . he couldn't look at the fucking woman" (151). Alcohol has interfered with his thought process so significantly that he cannot articulate the emotional significance of his story; he can only ask, "Do you see what I'm saying?" (151). He cannot explain that this is an example of the more permanent love he yearns for but fears he may never experience. The couple's deep spiritual love eludes his interpretive powers, and he destroys its purity with his profane language. This may appear to be emotional superficiality, but it is not; Mel is grappling with very deep emotions, both released and muddled by alcohol. The story ends abruptly, almost theatrically, when the gin runs out. Carver provides no resolution to the tension revealed under the influence of alcohol; he leaves the characters in the dark, listening only to their hearts beat.

"Chef's House" also explores issues of impermanence, but tension arises from alcohol very differently in this story. In "Chef's House," not a single drop of alcohol is consumed, yet it is the ever-present menace just under the surface of the characters' lives. Nowhere is Carver's desire to create "a sense that something is imminent" ("On Writing," 17) more powerfully realized. Edna decides to give up everything to move back in with her ex-husband Wes, a recovering alcoholic. They move into a house owned by Chef, Wes's sponsor, and start spending a blissful summer there together. Edna yearns for permanence, symbolized by her wedding ring: "I found myself wishing the summer wouldn't end. I knew better, but after a month of being with Wes in Chef's house, I put my wedding ring back on" (28). Their bliss, threatened by the menace of Wes's thin grasp on sobriety, is disrupted when Chef informs Wes that they must move out of the house so that his daughter can move in. Carver brings the menace to life; the day Chef comes, "clouds hung over the water" (29). Under this cloud, Wes succumbs to his perceived destiny as an alcoholic: "I'm sorry, I can't talk like somebody I'm not. I'm not somebody else" (32). When Wes decides to resume drinking, he chooses to end his relationship with Edna and to forget the emotional connection they shared. They must clean out Chef's house, and then "that will be the end of it" (33). Wes's sense of inevitability underscores Carver's conviction that "Menace is there, and it's a palpable thing" in most people's lives ("Interview with Raymond Carver" 67). Wes

and Edna both feel powerless against the irresistible draw, the mysterious menace, of alcohol.

Alcohol also menaces the characters' relationships and identities in "Where I'm Calling From." Set in a drying-out facility, the story is driven forward by the characters' fear of the lure of alcohol, of a relapse, of the impermanence of sobriety (ominously, the narrator is on his second stay). The menace looms larger when the narrator witnesses a fellow addict's seizure, as his body adjusts to withdrawal from alcohol. This awakens the narrator's deep fears of losing control of his body and his life: "But what happened to Tiny is something I won't ever forget. Old Tiny flat on the floor, kicking his heels. So every time this little flutter starts up anywhere, I draw some breath and wait to find myself on my back, looking up, somebody's fingers in my mouth" (129). To distract himself from his body's cravings and his battle for self-control, the narrator drinks coffee and listens to a newcomer's story: "J.P. quits talking. He just clams up. What's going on? I'm listening. It's helping me relax, for one thing. It's taking me away from my own situation" (134). Ironically, in this story, alcohol acts as a social lubricant, but not as a result of intoxication; talking and being social are the only things protecting these men from their need for alcohol. The men stay in control by telling each other about times when they had no control. J.P. remembers he had everything he wanted in life, "but for some reason—who knows why we do what we do?"—his drinking picks up . . . then a time comes, he doesn't know why, when he makes the switch from beer to gin-and-tonic . . . Things got out of hand. But he kept on drinking. He couldn't stop" (133-4). Alcohol, which gave him the confidence to ask for his first kiss, destroyed J.P.'s marriage to the love of his life, his happy home and children, and the job of his dreams. Most threatening of all, neither man can understand why he threw it all away. They tell their stories to stave off this tension, to try to attain control over the impermanence of sobriety and the menace that has shaped and ruined their lives.

"Cathedral" presents alcohol not as a destructive force, but as a constructive one, a means to build emotional connections between strangers, a way of liberating the mind and expanding consciousness. Alcohol functions in a positive capacity in this story, releasing tension, liberating the narrator, allowing him to see and connect in a way he is only open to do because he is stoned. The story opens with tension at its peak, with the

narrator in his most jealous and closed-minded state. A friend of his wife, a man she has a close emotional connection with, a blind man, is coming to visit. The wife used to read to the blind man, and after she left, she kept in close contact, constantly sending and receiving tapes on which they would tell each other every detail about their lives. The narrator is bothered by their closeness, that “they’d become good friends, my wife and the blind man,” (210), irritated when his wife dismisses his jealousy with the retort, “you don’t have *any* friends” (212). He is most affected by the fact that “on the last day in office, the blind man asked if he could touch her face. She agreed to this. She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose—even her neck! She never forgot it. She tried to write a poem about it [as she did] after something really important happened to her” (210). Her ineradicable memory of this intimate touch awakens her husband’s jealousy and fears of betrayal and abandonment, which intensifies his disgust with blindness: “And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed . . . A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to” (209). The superficiality of his vision is underscored by his lengthy description of the physical appearance of the blind man, which is salient in Carver’s writing because characters are typically minimally described.

As the story progresses, drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana release this tightly strung man’s inhibitions, facilitate male bonding, and finally expand and deepen his narrow, superficial vision. From the start, alcohol is introduced in a positive light, called a “pastime,” and received good-naturedly, even jokingly, by the blind man. Although the narrator begins drinking to drown out his jealousy of the emotional connection between his wife and the blind man, the end result of his intoxication, social lubrication, allows the man to reach an epiphany. Because his wife is smaller, she promptly falls asleep under the influence of the alcohol and drugs they all consume together, and neither man wakes her. When she no longer speaks, the source of tension between the two men is relieved and they are able to begin bonding. As the narrator drinks, he begins to appreciate the company of the blind man, and gradually realizes the emotional emptiness of his own life: “every night I smoked dope and stayed up as long as I could before I fell asleep. My wife and I hardly ever went to bed

at the same time” (222). Drinking and bonding with the blind man allow the narrator to confront his own loneliness and emotional evasions, and his mind and life start to open to new possibilities.

Gradually, guided by the blind man’s more expansive vision, the narrator begins thinking beyond the confines of his own narrow reality. As they “watch” a television program about cathedrals together, he suddenly remarks to the blind man, “something has occurred to me. Do you have any idea what a cathedral is?” (223). Although he describes the physical appearance of cathedrals, the narrator cannot capture their spiritual essence and begins to realize the limits of his perfectly healthy vision. Under the liberating influence of alcohol and drugs, he responds positively to the blind man’s suggestion that they draw a cathedral together, and allows himself to experience a physical and emotional connection that would have disgusted his sober self: “His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now” (228). This intimacy of hand touching hand, one man’s fingers riding another’s, recalls and transforms his vision of the blind man’s hand touching his wife’s face. Facing his deepest fear of real intimacy, the narrator inhabits and experiences the other man’s blindness; he closes his eyes, and then does not want to open them again, because he “didn’t feel like [he] was inside anything” (228). He feels completely free, no longer possessed by his jealousy, tension, or fear. The alcohol endows him with a liberating vulnerability he would never have been brave enough to reach were he not intoxicated. Although this story, too, ends with darkness, it is created by the narrator closing his eyes in an act of communion; the darkness signifies not unresolved tension or emotional evasion, but connection and revelation. The narrator has achieved a profound transformation of vision while under the influence of alcohol.

Alcohol possesses a paradoxical power in Raymond Carver’s short stories. The characters use alcohol to blunt their fear of death and the impermanence of life and love. But their consumption of alcohol in many cases brings them closer to death, and can just as quickly ruin love as stimulate it. Alcohol allows them to loosen up, to say and do things they would otherwise never be able to do, to tell their stories, but the intoxication robs them of their coherence. If they are able to finish their stories, it is possible that they won’t remember the profound nature of their intoxi-

cated experiences in a few short hours. Although alcohol acts as a social lubricant that allows the characters to connect with one another through stories, it also creates and surfaces tensions between loved ones and friends, and can even end up breaking connections. Alcohol gives and takes, pushes and pulls, and places the stories in what Carver in his essay “On Writing” calls “relentless motion” (17), driving tension forward as a sometimes intimate, sometimes menacing cosmic force that is nearly impossible for many of the characters to resist, control, or comprehend.

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