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ESCUELA DE LENGUA Y LITERATURA INGLESA

“RAYMOND CARVER’S SHORT STORIES AND THEIR INFLUENCES ON
AMERICAN LITERATURE”

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Licenciado en Ciencias de la Educación de la
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ABSTRACT

The present work, in which we talk about Raymond Carver's life and stories, is important in the literary field of our city because, since Carver is one of the best and most important story writers in America, he cannot stay any longer in the unknown. Therefore, what we have done is collect information about Carver's life and writing career and analyze this in order to comprehend why he and his work have been incredibly acclaimed in many countries. Also, how other writers have been influenced by Carver's masterpieces is to be explained and analyzed.

In order to carry out this investigation, the methods Analytic and Synthetic were required. The Analytic method helped us to study every aspect in Carver's life that was important and relevant in his work. Moreover, the Synthetic method helped us to organize all those aspects to understand the themes and style of his stories, and also to get conclusions about them. As a result, we learned what writers' lives are like and what leads them to write, including their motivations and preparation. We were also entertained and fascinated by the stories Carver wanted to share in every story he wrote. Likewise, this is important because of the impact that Carver's work has had in the literary world of America and many other countries where the stories and poetry written by him have reached.



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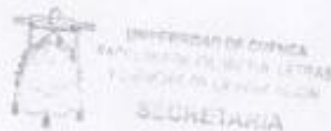
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DEDICATION

To my parents, Elva and Julio, who knew how to give me the advice and support, both emotional and economical, that I needed to overcome all obstacles and become the person I am, and culminate my studies and get a university degree. Also, to all my brothers, Paul, Diego, and John who gave me their support and comprehension.

Ruth

To my parents, Luis and Celia, for all the support and love given to me during the difficult and easy years of permanency in the university, and to whom I owe a life of dedication and love. Also I dedicate this thesis to every person in my family who helped and supported me, making this possible. And finally, to my thesis partner, Ruth, my everything.

Diego



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Thank You!



INTRODUCTION

Many authors in America have reached, throughout history, a prestigious place in the literary world. In fact, some of them have been so great at writing that they are considered among the best storytellers in history. The recognition those amazing writers gained, in some cases, was not even intended for them to get. Only with a lot of imagination and love for what they were doing, was that possible. Critics, even the severest ones, had nothing to do but surrender to the delight of the words expressed in every page of their masterpieces. A considerable part of those masterpieces that American literature possesses was written by Raymond Carver, a man belonging to the working classes, but strong enough to fight for what he loved until the last day of his life.

Raymond Carver has been exhaustively analyzed by American writers and critics, and even so, there are still so many things left to say. Carol Sklenicka, for example, is the author of the book describing Carver's whole biography. Moreover, authors and critics like Geoffrey Wolff, Stephen King, Bruce Weber, John Barth, Jay McInerney, Irving Howe, and Stuart Kellerman have discussed Carver's life and career thoroughly and from many points of view in The New York Times. Those critiques are excellent; however, the environment in which these critics live and the medium they used to spread their word are too far away from our location. There is almost no information about Raymond Carver in the libraries and bookstores of Cuenca. This is the main reason why we decided to continue with the analysis of Carver's life and stories, but this time, according to our own experience and background.



In the present investigation, it is possible to find a lot of information about Carver's life. The reason for doing this is that a great percentage of what Carver had written was related to his own biography; so, to understand his stories, it was necessary to go deeper than expected into his life. Furthermore, Carver's writing career is also to be described. That is because we can find a lot of what led him to write short stories in his academic preparation, influences, and other factors. Later in the investigation, before the review of all the stories included in his four major collections of short stories, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," "Cathedral," and "Where I'm Calling From," it is possible to find information containing the way Carver used to write and his writing procedures. Then the stories in the collections we just mentioned are to be summarized and analyzed.

Further ahead, since literary works affect mainly the emotions and knowledge of the readers, we will see how Carver's work has inspired a lot of young writers to follow in his path. In the same way some of the greatest storytellers of history, Anton Chekhov and Ernest Hemingway, for example, had a relevant influence in Carver's work, he and his stories had influenced a big number of young writers of his time. Those young writers, with the passage of time, have become the authors of significant pieces of literature as a consequence of Carver's stimulus. The impact that Carver's stories has had in American literature is still inducing many other young writers of our time to write like he did, not only in America, but also in many countries of the globe.

As a final point, the conclusions arrived at, recommendations, and works cited that we have presented in this investigation, will really help in further investigations and projects about Carver's short stories. We are sure that our readers, throughout the



pages of this thesis, will be able to find clear ideas of the amazing stories Raymond Carver had written, the way he did it, and the impact his work has had on his readers.



CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

1.1 Topic

Raymond Carver's Short Stories and their Influences on American Literature

1.2 Description of the problem

The problem of the investigation consists of the little information about Raymond Carver that we have available in this environment. Few people from this city are aware of his existence; as a result, when someone is asked about Raymond Carver, he or she is unable to say anything. This is the case of a great number of people among those who read.

As students of literature, we have noticed that Raymond Carver, one of the most prominent American short-story writers of our time, is not really known in our location. There is a lack of information as to whether Raymond Carver's life and work have contributed to American literature. In the same way like Raymond Carver, we have found that many of the relevant authors that have contributed to literature are unknown by people in our city. Especially short story writers. Novelists and poets, on the other hand, are more accepted and read by people of this locality.

In Cuenca, it is not easy to find information about Raymond Caver. People in bookstores or libraries can hardly identify him. Anyone can notice this just by asking for a book or a story by Raymond Carver. What they will surely find is the lack of information available.



For us, it is clear that Carver's influence is huge because of his great writings and the way they catch the attention of people. As soon as we read one of his stories, we were amazed by his topics and his style of telling the stories. We just could not believe how he has stayed unmentioned, despite his greatness. Additionally, it is important to know about his life and the way it influenced his work. To clarify this, let's state a fact we noticed. A great number of his stories mention, at least once, events of fishing or hunting, and when reading about his early life, we noticed that he lived those experiences. So, to understand the reasons of his topics, we have to go into his life more than expected. His own life was what made him a great fiction writer.

1.3 Justification

We strongly believe that it is important to develop this theme for these reasons: First, we want to let people know about Raymond Carver's life and work, and, based on it, establish writing procedures that will help to write short stories. We can learn lots of things by reading his stories. A clear example is the great number of authors who have read his stories and were influenced by his themes and style. Second, readers need to be influenced by the authors they read; so we think it is significant to analyze Carver's work, to follow in his steps. It is possible to induce people to start writing their own stories by being influenced by Carver's work. Raymond Carver had a great influence on American literature, so it is possible to influence our writing style, too, by taking his masterpieces as examples to be encouraged and stimulate our imagination and writing style.



What we have planned to do to solve this problem is to collect as much information about Raymond Carver as possible to be analyzed and put at the disposal of anybody who wants to know about his life and work in detail.

Moreover, reading has the power of teaching something, always. There is no use in reading if nothing is going to be learned. Therefore, Raymond Carver and his stories need to be introduced more deeply into the reading community, to see how much people can learn by getting acquainted with him and reading his work. Since he was the most influential short-story writer in the past 50 years, there is no way of leaving him out of our context. That is what characters who knew him say. For instance, Richards Cortez Day, Carver's Literature Professor at Humboldt State University, said that he knew how big Carver would become because of his strong sense of narrative, but also, and more important, for his voice of telling things in his stories. (Halpert 1)

According to the problem, we have said that Raymond Carver has influenced many writers' style. Therefore, the level of influence that he had has to be closely analyzed. That is, which of his writing characteristics have been adopted by other writers. It will be necessary to go inside the most important of his characteristics, his awesome capacity to create such great writings, and his themes. Of course, it will be also necessary to know who influenced him. The reason for doing that is to know what exactly inspired him to start writing. As an illustration of this, let's consider this example. When Silvia Del Pozo asked him if he agree to be called the father of the new wave, he answered, "I'm only the father of my own children. But think my experience and success have encouraged lots of young writers to follow my path." (Stull)



So many characteristics made him an icon among so many people. To mention one of those characteristics we are talking about, let's say something about his strong sense of narrative. For example, when talking about life in the country, he mentioned every single detail in all the things that he could see. He made his stories as real as possible. Moreover, when he talks about feelings he goes deep inside the person, as if he is the one who feels it, as the character. In other words, he feels what the characters are feeling. Let's not forget the power he had to attract the attention of the readers. His stories are interesting from the beginning to the end. For all of this, we strongly consider that Raymond Carver is a character worthy to be studied.

1.4 Objectives

1.4.1 General Objective

To analyze Carver's life and work and how they have influenced the writing style of many American authors of the 20th century.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

- To research Carver's life and motivation for writing short stories.
- To briefly describe Carver's procedures to write short stories.
- To analyze Carver's style and topics of his works and their impact on the American audience, especially on other writers of his time.



CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Carver's Life

Although it is true that we intend to talk about Carver's short stories in this investigation, it may turn into a really hard job if we do not go into his personal life, first. The reason for doing that is the high number of personal experiences mentioned in his stories - his own life was part of his work. Consequently, let's start exploring his life exhaustively.

Every little aspect of him influenced his writings; his life, his experiences, his lifestyle, his parents, his parents' jobs and lifestyle, the authors he read, and many other factors. All these factors created a writer, but not any writer, an excellent short-story writer who based the themes of the writings on the forgotten working class of the American country. That is why it is important to pay attention to all those aspects, to understand his reasons to come to be a writer and the themes of the stories.

Of all the factors stated above, one great influence on young Raymond was definitely his father. He was probably the most important stimulus of all. He spent a lot of time with him, working and facing life together in the same conditions. Raymond Carver once said that his father used to tell him stories, and that made him think of becoming a writer. As a consequence, a considerable part of his life and behavior can be understood by understanding his family, too, and his father above all.

When looking at his biography, we found hard times and serious problems in Raymond Carver's life. Two marriages and a problem with drinking darkened a little the



picture of such a great character of literature. However, the source of these later problems seemed to be placed in his early life. Many of Carver's attitudes can be traced to his father's behavior.

Some people say that his stories play the role of an autobiography. Carver himself recognized that he used many autobiographical elements to write his stories. That means that his life, experiences, and other events that left a mark on him were used as topics for his writings. In other words, his own life was what gave him a lot to write about. For that reason, we will start describing his life and what he had to go through during his lifetime, in order to understand his stories better.

2.1.1 Carver's Family and Early Life

The great short story writer, who revitalized the American short story, was born on May 25, 1898, in Clatskanie, Oregon, a small town in the Northwestern region of the United States. His hometown was a small mill town on the Columbia River. He was the son of a waitress, Ella Casey Carter, and a saw-mill worker, Cleve Raymond Carver. His parents had to work hard to survive, and as soon as Ray graduated, he also had to work to help his family. So, in his early life, young Raymond did not know how it feels to have a comfortable life.

The writer shared his childhood with one brother, James Franklin Carver. He was born in 1943. The family of four had to fight hard to survive.

Both father and son were called Raymond Carver, so, to differentiate one from the other, young Raymond was known as "Junior." Everyone in his family called him that, though Raymond declared that he did not like it very much. His father, on the other



hand, used to call him “frog,” but later he started calling him, like the rest of the family used to do, “Junior.”

Clevie Raymond Carver greatly influenced his son since the author’s first days of life. Ray’s father was a man whose life was not easy at all. He used to wander town to town, looking for a job. The state of poverty in which he lived made it hard to solve his problems. Thus, besides his unemployment, drinking was another of his characteristics. When old Raymond Carver met his wife, he was drunk. Ella, his wife, said she did not know why she let him get close to her; nevertheless, in the end, they married. Ray’s father was also characterized by having many girlfriends. He had girlfriend even after being married to Ella Carter. All these circumstances left a mark on Raymond Jr.’s life. We will see later that father and son were like a mirror, since the behavior of old Raymond would resemble his son’s later in time.

After trying many jobs, old Raymond went from working on a dam in Omak, Washington, to work in a sawmill in Clatskanie, Oregon. In that city, as we already said, Ella Carter gave birth to Raymond Carver Jr.

During his first years of life, the writer had to share his parents’ poverty. Old Raymond still did not have enough money to keep his family. When things were difficult in one place, the Carvers would solve them by moving to another city. In this situation, young Raymond lived. He said that “home was a little two-bedroom house. We moved a lot when I was a kid, but it was always into another little two-bedroom house.” (Simpson and Buzbee)

Young Raymond and his family used to move very frequently. Some places they lived in were Clatskanie, Oregon; Yakima, Washington; Chester, California; Paradise,



California; Chico, California; Iowa City, Sacramento, Palo Alto, Tel Aviv, San Jose, Santa Cruz, Cupertino, and Humboldt County. They used to move over and over again that it is hard to tell exactly all the places where lived, and where they stayed longer or shorter.

In Oregon, Raymond Carver's father went on working as a sawmill worker. Having acquired experience, old Raymond and his family moved to Yakima, Washington, in 1941. At that time, Young Raymond was about 3 years old - too young to be aware of all the trials he would have to go through in the upcoming years.

In this way, moving a lot and living in poverty became the main features of young Raymond's life. This situation made of him an introverted person, a characteristic he owned until the last day of his life. In his life as adult, Ray was still a shy person having a low voice when he spoke. Ella Carter, his mother, described a little the manner Raymond behaved when he was still young by stating her son seemed to be vague and "never seemed to know where he was or why he was there." (King) Therefore, he spent a great part of his free time dreaming awake. His mind was always full of ideas, dreams, goals, and thoughts. It was an important period of life for all the things that made him grow as a person – a writer was also growing inside him.

Because of their constant moving and other factors, young Carver found solace and a passion for literature while reading Mickey Spillane mystery novels, along with Field and Stream publications. (Dota) Further reading would include the best story writers of history, Hemingway and Chekhov, for example. It was then when the influence of great writers started to shape Carver's writing style.



Years later, young Raymond spent a considerable part of his time in open-air activities. His passion was fishing and hunting. When being interviewed by Mona Simpson, Raymond said that “in those days,” when he was young, “I went fishing in this creek that was not too far from our house. A little later, I started hunting ducks and geese and upland game. That’s what excited me in those days, hunting and fishing. That’s what made a dent in my emotional life, and that’s what I wanted to write about.” (Simpson and Buzbee) Sometimes he used to go fishing alone, but it was his father who took him a lot of times to fish in every opportunity they had. And, as he said, those experiences would become the topics of his writings. There are a lot of stories that talk about fishing, for instance, “Nobody Said Anything” and “So Much Water So Close to Home.” In those two acclaimed stories, the events took place at a river while the characters were fishing. In the same way, there are lots of other writings in which happenings of fishing or hunting are the basis of many stories.

In the thorough Carver’s biography written by Carol Sklenicka, she made reference about this period in Carver’s life. She wrote that “like most teenagers, he did not have a lot of perspective on his own situation. He went off by himself, walking or biking, to spend a day fishing and reading and daydreaming.” (Sklenicka) It can be said that Ray’s lifestyle at that time was just like the boy’s life in his own story “Nobody Said Anything.” In this story, the boy who narrated it was left home alone, so he started to go room by room to see what he could find. Then he went fishing to a nearby creek, where he fantasized with a woman and caught some fish.

As an adolescent, Ray continued suffering a lot, not only because of his own problems, but also his father’s. Young Raymond had to see his father kill himself with



alcohol. He said his father had to battle against poverty and sickness. Besides, he used to live with the family in a trailer, and never seemed to have a constant job. To make this worse, he got very sick because of his drinking that would lead him to get hospitalized later. Those were not easy days for the Carvers.

Despite those unpleasant circumstances, young Raymond was close to his father and admired him so much. They spent a lot of time together and when young Ray decided to help with the economic situation of his family, he made up his mind to work and earn his own money. He wanted to work with his father as a sawmill laborer.

There is nobody better than him to tell us how those days were like. Trying to get established and to form his own family was not easy for young Raymond:

It was assumed that I'd graduate and go to work at the sawmill. For a long time I wanted to do the kind of work my dad did. [...] So I worked at the mill for about six months. But I hated the work and knew from the first day I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. I worked long enough to save the money for a car, buy some clothes, and so I could move out and get married. (Simpson and Buzbee)

In the end, young Ray did not enjoy working as a sawmill employee though he wanted to be part of it before. He felt forced to work there in order to be independent and get married. Later, he tried to pursue his dreams which were working on something he really liked, that was writing.

Furthermore, Carver's mother, Ella, also had to try a lot of jobs to help her family. In Sklenicka's book, it is also possible to find lots of details about her life. "Ella pursued her work life with remarkable zeal and deep restlessness. She changed jobs frequently,



working stretches of a few weeks to a year at cafes, stores, and fruit warehouses,” Sklenicka wrote. (Sklenicka 19) That was how all the members of Ray’s family lived in a constant struggle to take the bread home. Ella had to work because her husband used to waste all his money buying alcohol. She had children to feed, and so she could not expect to get money from him because, sometimes, he brought nothing home but his drunk-self. “Typically, spouses of alcoholics are afraid to expose their family situation.” (Sklenicka 19) To protect her family situation, as this sentence states, Ella had no other option than working. Mainly, she used to wait tables for low wages. Young Ray was used to see her with a waitress uniform on. Because of that, many stories he wrote included waitresses at work. Besides, waitresses figured “in his fiction, and his unpublished papers included a folder of notes and manuscript scraps for an unfinished ‘Waitress.’” (Sklenicka 19) In the same way, there are other stories that have been published that mention waitresses. For example, in “Fat,” the story is about a waitress’s experience, in “Nobody Said Anything,” a young boy saw her mother’s waitress uniform in her closet, in “Elephant,” the narrator’s mother said she used to be a waitress. Likewise, in many other stories, mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and even ex-wives were given this job by Carver. This fact reveals how influential Carver’s experiences were on his stories.

Continuing with his early life, a little while after graduating from Yakima High School in 1956, young Raymond and his mother moved to Chester, California, where old Raymond had been working. He was working at a sawmill, and he had written a letter telling them he said he was sick. Alcohol always kills little by little, and old Raymond’s drinking addiction was destroying him the way liquor does. Raymond and his



mother immediately traveled to Chester to take care of him. There, at Ray's eyes, his father was no longer the man he knew. Drinking made him look different from what he had been long before. In the end, he got hospitalized, but finally he got better though his end was not so far away. Old Raymond continued to have the same lifestyle as always, and his own son was about to know what it was like.

Young Raymond kept lots of the characteristics he had in his adolescence, and the only difference was that he got married and had to work for his own family. The writer's wife was Maryann Burk. He married her at the age of 18, while she was 16 and pregnant. He found himself living old Raymond's life. It was like he would have put himself in his father's shoes and live life his father shared with him.

By then, around 1956, young Raymond had already made up his mind about becoming a writer. When telling this story about his father, Carver mentioned an important decision about being an author:

During those years I was trying to raise my own family and earn a living. But, one thing and another, we found ourselves having to move a lot. I couldn't keep track of what was going down in my dad's life. But I did have a chance one Christmas to tell him I wanted to be a writer. I might as well have told him I wanted to become a plastic surgeon. 'What are you going to write about?' he wanted to know. Then, as if to help me out, he said, 'Write about stuff you know about. Write about some of those fishing trips we took.' I said I would, but I knew I wouldn't. 'Send me what you write,' he said. I said I'd do that, but then I didn't. I wasn't writing anything about fishing, and I didn't think he'd particularly care about, or even necessarily understand, what I was writing in those days. Besides,



he wasn't a reader. Not the sort, anyway, I imagined I was writing for.
(Washington State University)

That conversation with his father tells a lot about his later stories; however, it also emphasizes his lifestyle which was just like his father's. He also started moving a lot, for example. In addition, he had to work at night and attend college in the course of the day. This situation in which he found himself was not to get a happy ending. Drinking, which was his father's addiction, became his own problem.

According to Ray's words cited above, his father gave him the idea to write about their fishing and hunting experiences. At that moment, he did not intend to write about fishing, but in the end, he actually wrote a lot of stories that contained those early days of his life with his father. This was the beginning of his career. From then on, he started enrolling writing and literature classes at many universities though his working made this more difficult than he expected.

A little more than a decade had passed by and things continued going wrong for the writer. Then Ray was hit with terrible news when he heard his father had died on June 17, 1967. After his death, he wrote a poem in his honor, talking about a photograph of his father.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MY FATHER IN HIS TWENTY SECOND YEAR

October. Here in this dank, unfamiliar kitchen
I study my father's embarrassed young man's face.
Sheepish grin, he holds in one hand a string
of spiny yellow perch, in the other



a bottle of Carlsberg beer.

In jeans and flannel shirt, he leans

Against the front fender of a 1934 Ford.

He would like to pose brave and hearty for his posterity,

Wear his old hat cocked over his ear.

All his life my father wanted to be bold.

But the eyes give him away, and the hands

that limply offer the string of dead perch

and the bottle of beer. Father, I love you,

yet how can I say thank you, I who can't hold my liquor either and don't even
know the places to fish. (Washington State University)

In its few lines, the poem describes all the characteristics of Ray's father. It creates a clear picture of his physical appearance and what he meant to his son. Ray's father was gone, though his legacy would live inside his own son. After reading it, we understood how those hard days were like. They truly were a constant struggle to stay alive.

Additionally, he wrote a lot of poems, essays, and other writings about his father. He was a great inspiration for Carver's writing career. For example, we found a poem titled "My Dad's Wallet," that was written when his father was long gone, around 1983. This described Ray's father and the life he lived. Apparently, those days were still present in his mind. In a fragment of it, we will understand what Carver had to say about his dad:



My dad, though.

He was restless even in death.

Even in death he had this one trip to take.

All his life he liked to wander, and now
he had one more place to get to. (Weber)

That was what Carver had to say in this poem. There were still many things that he wanted to share about his father. The poem is relative long, and he ended it with the following words:

We started at the wallet for a minute.
Nobody said anything.
All the life had gone out of that wallet.
It was old and rent and soiled.
But it was my dad's wallet.
And she opened it and looked inside.
Drew out a handful of money that would go
toward this last, most astounding, trip. (Weber)

It is clear the old Raymond was an influent figure in his son's life and writing career. He was an inspiration for young Raymond, and he would give him the strength to write even in the hardest days.

Therefore, after analyzing and getting deeper into his life, it was noticeable that his family influenced Carver and left a deep mark on every aspect of his lifestyle, and also writing style. In this way, when the writer became independent, old Raymond's life



was going to be reproduced by his own son. Alcoholism was not only his father's problem, but Ray got involved in the same situation in which he saw his father during a great part of his life. Carver himself knew what it was like to be dependent on alcohol. That problem made him lose all the things he loved and ended up leading him to the grave.

As said, his family played a dominant role in his personal and emotional life. They inspired and gave him the basis of many of his later stories. Alcoholism, broken relationships, and people working blue-collar jobs would be described in every story Carver wrote. Additionally, it is possible to find desperation, loss, fears, and other unhappy feelings in the tales that would become the admiration of so many around the world. All those feelings could be easily seen in the life Carver had to live when he came to this world. And though it is true that his early life was full of problems and unhappy pictures, he decided to write about them after all. That is why he was often criticized, for being so hopeless in some cases. However, the same themes in following stories made him get the acclamation of thousands.

2.1.2 Raymond Carver's Writing Career

At this point, we will start analyzing Carver's life during his productive years, including his motivation for writing short stories, his influences, and his academic preparation. These points to be treated are strong reasons why he is known and admired and is the motivation of this investigation. However, since Carver had established two period of his life, his first and second life, and most of his preparation



occurred in his first life, we will also talk about his problems like drinking, the main characteristic of this life, while analyzing his preparation.

2.1.2.1 Carver's Motivation for Writing Short Stories

In our tour through Ray's early years, we have already talked about the things that motivated him to start writing. Some of these reasons were his father's stories, his own experiences, and his desire for writing.

First of all, one important motivation was his father. It was he who inspired him to write about a lot of topics. Lots of ideas for his later writings were given to him by old Raymond. It has been said that "as a boy growing up in Yakima, Washington, Raymond Carver used to slip into his parents' room in the evening, sit at the foot of the bed, and ask his father to tell him a story. 'He was a good talker,' Mr. Carver said. 'All I had to do to get him going was ask about my great-grandfather.'" (Kellerman, For Raymond Carver, a Lifetime of Storytelling) He loved his stories very much, as much as his trips to fish and hunt with his father. Old Raymond was a good story teller, though he was not a good reader. All his stories were about his personal experiences with his family. It was then that he decided to be a writer. At that time, his passion for writing was increasing, and he brought into being his skill to write thanks to his father.

The stories told by the writer's father were really stimulating because he told him about a number of topics that young Raymond really liked to hear about. At least, that is what Carver himself affirmed:



The only explanation I can give you – to start writing - is that my dad told me lots of stories about himself when he was a kid, and about his dad and his grandfather. His grandfather had fought in the Civil War. He fought for both sides! He was a turncoat. When the South began losing the war, he crossed over to the North and began fighting for the Union forces. My dad laughed when he told this story. He didn't see anything wrong with it, and I guess I didn't either. Anyway, my dad would tell me stories, anecdotes really, no moral to them, about tramping around in the woods, or else riding the rails and having to look out for railroad bulls. I loved his company and loved to listen to him tell me these stories.
(Simpson and Buzbee)

This is what he said while being interviewed in his house in New York. In fact, a great part of what we know about Raymond Carver has been expressed by him during interviews. There is nobody better than him to tell us his reason for becoming a short-story writer.

Additionally to his father's stimulus, there are also many other factors that influenced his writings and his style.

It is true that the American short story was dying at the time that Carver decided to write them. This was a kind of writing that, as time passed, fewer writers decided to use to write. Novelists were better known and their works were being sold very well at that time. On the other hand, short stories had a small audience. Many short-story writers of that time had written also novels.¹ However, in spite of this fact, young

¹ Later, we will notice that many author that influenced Carver's work and others that were influenced by Carver were both novelists and short-story writers because of that fact.



Raymond tried this kind of writing, doing it better than any other writer of his time. His reason for doing it is also to be clarified in this investigation.

Why did he decide to write short stories and not novels? somebody may ask himself. The reason was that he needed to earn a living as fast as possible, since his situation required it. Married and with two children to take care of, he had no other option than going to college and starting writing immediately. Besides, Raymond felt the necessity to get money from his writings in a short period of time. He knew that writing a novel would take a lot of time - at least two or three years. Therefore, writing *short* stories was his way to get quick results from his work. Probably, if he had more time and were not married with children, he would have written another kind of writing – novels, for example. He surely had the ability, but not the time to write novels and more short stories. It all was a matter of time, but his time was over before he had the opportunity to write any long writing.

He started his career by writing poems, since he found a great attraction to poetry. After that he decided to write short stories. Both the poems and the stories were short because they could be written in the same way and in a short period of time.

In another interview, with Claude Grimal, Raymond was asked for his reason to write short stories. He answered it was because of his:

...life circumstances. I was very young. I got married at eighteen. My wife was seventeen; she was pregnant. I had no money at all, and we had to work all the time and bring up our two children. It was also necessary that I go to college to learn how to write, and it was simply impossible to start something that would



have taken me two or three years. So I set myself to writing poems and short stories. I could sit down at a table, start and finish in one sitting". (Stull)

So, Carver's necessity of earning money led him to look at writing as a way to afford his family's requirements. He was practically forced to write and to have instant results.

The situation in which Raymond was stuck finally became an additional motivation for writing short stories. As we said, in other circumstances, Ray's work would have been novels. He actually tried to write a novel, but it was never finished. The short stories were what gave him such greatness and recognition.

2.1.2.2 Carver's Influences

Writers, in the same way like singers, artists, composers, and other people, always influence one another, so they can continue with a certain movement and so improve their own work. As a growing writer, Raymond Carver had to do it, and it resulted fascinating for him. Later in time, he would start reading a lot of great authors that he admired. His most renowned influences were John Gardner, Anton Chekhov, Ernest Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor, James Salter, Isaac Babel, Frank O'Connor, VS Pritchett, Leo Tolstoy, Tobias Wolff, John Cheever, and Richard Ford, among others. All these writers were admired by Raymond Carver and gave him lot of things, not only in his desire for writing, but also in the style, and even writing techniques.

All of them had an important role all along Carver's path to become a brilliant writer. But it was not always like that. Before his writing career started, Carver loved to read though he did not know exactly what or whom to read. "I'd go to the library and



follow my nose,” he said. “I’d pick up a book because of its cover or jacket.” That situation is similar to our own reality. Nowadays, many students of literature choose a book to read not because of the author, but because the picture on the cover attracts the sight or because the title suggests an interesting story. However, the cover is not always quite like the book. It is sad that they are not often acquainted with all the names of the big authors of literature. This was the situation of young Ray. It was difficult for him to tell what writers were the worthiest to read at a short age. As he got experience in the writing world, he started to differentiate between the good authors and those whose work were not so good. Directly or indirectly lots of writers taught him something. Those who did it directly were his professors at college and friend, and those who did it indirectly were the authors the liked to read.

Among Carver’s influences, we have listed a number of great writers and others considered the best of all the time. So let’s start talking about John Gardner, a novelist whose influence over Carver was considerably important. After Carver moved to California, in 1958, he “enrolled as a part-time student at Chico State College,” (Weber) It was there that Raymond met Gardner. At Chico State College, he took John Gardner’s creative writing course. That course was really helpful to Carver, since a number of important things were acquired by him at Gardner’s class. Carver considered Gardner as an inspiring influence on his writing career. “He galvanized me,” Carver said. “He told me who to read and helped me learn to write. I’d write something and he’d patiently go over it line by line.” (Kellerman, For Raymond Carver, a Lifetime of Storytelling) As his first stimulus, John Gardner developed Carver’s best abilities for writing, and introduced him other writers’ works to read. Carver was lucky to have such



a great author to help him improve his own work. Also, they used to spend hour working on stories. “Back then I didn’t even know what a writer looked like [...] John looked like a writer,” Carver said when he first met Garner. (McInerney) Then he added that “I tried to copy the way he walked. He used to let me work in his office because I didn’t have a quiet place to work.” (McInerney) Apparently, Carver adopted more than just Gardner’s writing habit, but also his personality was shaped by his professor. Then Carver said “I’d go through his files and steal the titles of his stories, use them on my stories.” (McInerney) Thus, Carver imitated more than a few characteristics from the novelist who would be his first significant influence, and certainly, that is what writers often do – imitate one another. Imitation helps them to find their own voice and style, and Gardner’s contribution would remain within Carver’s mind and would be expressed in his work during the rest of his career.

The second author in the list is Anton Chekhov, a Russian writer. He is remembered as one of the greatest short-story writers not only of his time, but of history. His work has influenced a great number of famous writers around the world – including Carver and Hemingway, among others. That is why Chekhov is counted as the greatest influence in Carver’s career and his motivation to write “Errand”, one of his final stories. This story is about the Russian writer’s final hours and death. Some say that when Carver wrote “Errand,” he was in the preparation to write a novel. About this, Carver said he could write anything he wanted to, even a novel. In the end, it was never finished because of his unexpected death. Moreover, Carver was always reading and acquiring the best characteristics of the authors he liked. In his prose, Carver mixed the



simple clarity of Chekhov with the warning tones of Franz Kafka². Getting the best of each author made him grow to become as big as the most famous writers of history.

In the Paris Review, Carver mentioned why Chekhov had become one of his favorite short-story writers. He let us know that a great inspiration was “Chekhov. I suppose he’s the writer whose work I most admire. But who doesn’t like Chekhov?” He also added that “years ago I read something in a letter by Chekhov that impressed me. It was a piece of advice to one of his many correspondents, and it went something like this: Friend, you don’t have to write about extraordinary people who accomplish extraordinary and memorable deeds.” (Simpson and Buzbee) At the time he read that letter, Ray was attending college and “reading plays about princes and dukes and the overthrow of kingdoms.” Nevertheless, “reading what Chekhov had to say in that letter, [...] made me see things differently than I had before.” (Simpson and Buzbee) It is clearly explained what Chekhov had done for Carver’s writing life. He realized that the best writers who succeed were not those who write about the important people, but those who write about any person and still is able to get admiration and recognition because of the way they express their ideas. Certainly, this is one of Carver’s main writing characteristics, and it can be clearly noticed in his stories. People that are usually marginalized are the stars of Carver’s stories, and then readers became interested in their lives.

Raymond Carver and Anton Chekhov were similar both in life and writing style. Due this fact, Ray was often called the American Chekhov by many people. Donald Justice talked a little bit about the similarity of Carver’s and Chekhov’s styles. He said

² Franz Kafka was a German-language writer of short stories, regarded by critics as one of the most influential authors of the 20th century.



that “The Student Wife,” and many of Carver’s early stories included in his first collection, were particularly comparable with the manner that Chekhov wrote his books. He added that “I particularly like those early stories. They strike me as having a true Chekhovian shape and form along with sympathy for characters that you wouldn’t expect to be sympathetic with. That’s one of the marks of Chekhov as far as I’m concerned.” (Halpert 33) This similarity goes beyond than simple chance, and what Carver had affirmed helps us to be sure of it. Chekhov was an indisputably master of fiction, and he helped lots of other writers to be as great as him, and apparently, Carver was one of the first authors in the long list of people whom Chekhov’s stories influenced.

Another of Carver’s important influences was Ernest Hemingway. Seemingly, Carver’s most important techniques were adopted from him. Carver read lots of stories by Hemingway during his early years, which increased his passion for reading and writing. He said that he “read his early stories when I was 18 or 19. There was something about the cadence of those sentences that excited me. It wasn’t just what he was writing about but how he was writing about it. I can still read Hemingway with pleasure. I know he’s not the most popular author right now, but I think he’s a marvelous writer.” (Kellerman, For Raymond Carver, a Lifetime of Storytelling) Because of that, Ray’s and Ernest’s works have a lot in common. Both of them used “indeterminate pronouns, open endings, traditional and mimetic symbolism, non-mimetic techniques including the symbolic resonance in numbers and the omission of key details to create meaning in subtle, complex ways.” (Bethea) These characteristics are the clearest evidence of how Raymond’s and Hemingway’s works are related to each other. It is



mostly noted in Carver's initial work, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" The great similarity between the stories in this collection and Hemingway's work are more than a simple coincidence. "...the simplicity and clarity, the repetitions, the nearly conversational rhythms, the precision of physical description" of Hemingway are also found throughout the pages of Carver's work. (McInerney) It is clear that Carver followed the steps of this great author, in topics, but mostly in style. However, there are still differences and particular characteristics of each author's environment.

...Carver completely dispensed with the romantic egoism that made the Hemingway idiom such an awkward model for other writers in the late 20th century. The cafes and pensions and battlefields of Europe were replaced by trailer parks and apartment complexes, the glamorous occupations by dead-end jobs. The trout in Carver's streams were apt to be pollution-deformed mutants. The good vin du pays was replaced by cheap gin, the romance of drinking by the dull grind of full-time alcoholism. Some commentators found his work depressing for these reasons. (McInerney)

Carver's work reflected the world in which he grew, and it was not possible to find luxurious things in Carver's childhood and adolescence. Moreover, his life as adult was also full of problem. His lack of money and his trying many jobs to get it were his main characteristics in his early years, but he still had time to read the stories written by Hemingway. Among some Hemingway's works Carver liked, we have "the early stories. 'Big Two-Hearted River,' 'Cat in the Rain,' 'The Three-Day Blow,' 'Soldier's Home,' lots more." (Simpson and Buzbee) Those stories surely gave him a lot to think and write



about. But Carver was indisputable rich in imagination and passion to writing, and that is why he had been considered the best American story writer since Hemingway.

Another author having influence over Carver's work that we will consider is Flannery O'Connor, who lived from 1925 to 1964. She was the author of two novels, "Wise Blood," which appeared in 1952, and "The Violent Bear It Away" in 1960. Her collections of short stories were "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," published in 1955, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" in 1965, and "The Complete Stories" in 1971. The last one was awarded with the U. S. National Book Award for Fiction in 1972. Carver loved those works, and they surely gave him the inspiration he needed to continue creating amazing stories.

Carver also admired Isaac Babel's stories, and so he also became another of his most relevant influences. He was a Russian journalist, playwright, and short-story writer, who lived and wrote long before Carver started writing, and died in 1940, when Ray was only 2 years old. "He loved all the 19th-century Russians," the author Jay McInerney said in his book review, and that is why many authors from Russia appear as his most relevant influences. Babel is now remembered for works such as "Red Cavalry," "Story of My Dovecote," and "Tales of Odessa." This works are considered masterpieces of Russian literature, and so writers from all over the world became interested in them. Carver was one of them.

Leo Tolstoy, another important Russian writer, also contributed with his writings to shape Carver's writing style. He is considered a giant of Russian literature because of his novels, short stories, and novellas³. He was one of Chekhov contemporaries, since

³ A novella is defined as a written, fictional, prose narrative normally longer than a short story but shorter than a novel. They are often called short novels.



he was born in 1828 and died in 1910. Important writers and critics had described him as the greatest of all novelists. His two most famous novels are “War and Peace,” published in 1869, and “Anna Karenina,” which was published in serial episodes from 1873 to 1877. Among his most renowned novellas, we have “Hadji Murad,” Tolstoy’s final work which appeared in 1912, two years after his death, and “The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” which appeared in 1886. When Carver was asked about the writers he most admired, he mentioned Tolstoy as one of them, adding that he liked “any of his short stories, novellas, and ‘Anna Karenina.’ Not ‘War and Peace.’ Too slow. But ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyich,’ ‘Master and Man,’ [and] ‘How Much Land Does a Man Need?’” (Simpson and Buzbee) The last two works called Carver’s attention since they are short stories.

From Tolstoy, Carver also learned to proofread his work and to rewrite many of his stories. He stated that:

I’m thinking of the photographs of galleys belonging to Tolstoy, to name one writer who loved to revise. I mean, I don’t know if he loved it or not, but he did a great deal of it. He was always revising, right down to the time of page proofs. He went through and rewrote ‘War and Peace’ eight times and was still making corrections in the galleys. Things like this should hearten every writer whose first drafts are dreadful, like mine are. (Simpson and Buzbee)

From this comment, we realized that not only Tolstoy’s style was mimicked by Carver, but also some of his writing habits. These Russian writers we mentioned are often referred as the greatest of history, and they have influenced thousands of other writers around the world. Since Carver was a lover of Russian literature, many



characteristics of those writers were imitated by him, and that was why he became so good at writing.

The next of Carver's great influences was Tobias Wolff. They are often grouped in the same movement, called "Dirty Realism," with many other writers of the 70s and 80s. Wolff has also been compared to Raymond Carver since a great number of his works described his own personal experiences, just like Raymond's. Additionally, at Syracuse University Wolff served on the faculty with Raymond Carver and was an instructor in the graduate writing program. At that period of time, they shared a great deal of ideas and techniques about writing. They also spent a lot of time reading one another's writings. "His book of stories 'In the Garden of the North American Martyrs' is just wonderful," said Carver. (Simpson and Buzbee) And Wolff was also fascinated with his friend's stories. Furthermore, under Wolff's influence, Raymond became better known as a writer, having as a result, an increase of readers of Ray's work. Wolff's work was also influenced by Carver. It is possible to say that they influenced one another.

Continuing with the writers that influenced Carver's life and career most, John Cheever appears on the list. He had a great effect on Raymond, though this effect was more bad than good. At the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1973, Carver and Cheever became friends and spent most of their time drinking. At that time, Cheever was a famous story writer, though Ray was scarcely known. In the New Times Book Review of 2009, Stephen King made a reference to this episode in Ray's life. He cited Carver's words, declaring that, in Iowa, "he and I did nothing but drink." (King) Practically they spent all their time drinking, leaving out all the teaching and writing. "I don't think either of us ever took the covers off our typewriters," he said, to make clear his nonexistence



of desire to write. (King) Consequently, Cheever's influence on Carver was not good at all. Cheever noted in his journal that Carver was "a very kind man." On the other hand, he also described Carver as "an irresponsible alcoholic who habitually ran out on the check in restaurants, even though he must have known it was the waitress who had to pay the bill for such dine-and-dash customers. His wife, after all, often waited on tables to support him." (King) Cheever soon stopped drinking by looking for help at a treatment center for alcoholics, whereas Carver continued to drink more heavily day after day. The mark left by the drinking days on Carver is so relevant in his life that alcoholism became the subject of many of his famous stories. For instance, "Chef's House," "A Serious Talk," and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," tell stories of people drinking in their house. Furthermore, "Vitamins," is the story of a man who did not realize that he had a drinking problem, and "Where I'm Calling From," in which the narrator has ended up in an alcohol rehabilitation center. (Liukkonen)

Finally, let's take into consideration Richard Ford, who was also among those great authors who shaped Carver's greatness. Ford belonged to a movement known as "Dirty Realism." In this way, Ford was closely acquainted to Raymond and to his work as much as he was to Tobias Wolff. This movement appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, including these authors and many others.

To clarify this term of "Dirty Realism," let's review a definition of it. "Dirty realism is the fiction of a new generation of American authors. They write about the belly-side of contemporary life – a deserted husband, an unwed mother, a car thief, a pickpocket, a drug addict – but they write about it with a disturbing detachment, at times verging on comedy. Understated, ironic, sometimes savage, but insistently compassionate, these



stories constitute a new voice in fiction.” (Granta Magazine) Once it is understood, we realize that the stories of these authors, among whom Carver was, have a lot of these characteristics. The characters of their stories are conformed for what is called the working class. Furthermore, Carver said that he liked many of Ford’s stories. “He’s primarily a novelist,” Carver said, “but he’s also written stories and essays. He’s a friend. I have a lot of friends who are good friends, and some of them are good writers. Some not so good.” (Simpson and Buzbee) But Ford was surely one of those friends and writers whose work was directly influenced by Carver, and vice-versa.

In the list, there are only few writers mentioned by Carver as the ones whose works he admired. Of course, there are many others writer who had touched Carver’s heart. As an additional fact, Carver liked the works of authors from many nationalities. Frank O’Connor, for example, was Irish, and Chekhov, Babel, and Tolstoy were from Russia. But the majority of his influences were American, and some of them he had even interacted with. They all helped to build what would be the greatest America short-story writer of his time.

2.1.2.3 Academic Preparation

In reference to his academic preparation, Raymond Carver started attending college in California. We have said that besides his personal problems, he had to go to college to learn how to write. In The New York Times Book Review, Bruce Weber cited Ray’s words expressing the situation in which he found himself:

I learned a long time ago, when my kids were little, and we had no money, and we were working our hearts out and weren't getting anywhere, even though we



were giving it our best, my wife and I, that there were more important things than writing a poem or a story. That was a very hard realization for me to come to. But it came to me, and I had to accept it or die. Getting milk and food on the table, getting the rent paid, if a choice had to be made, then I had to forgo writing.
(Weber)

Raymond was aware that his duty as a husband and a father came first, and then the writing part. But he never left the writing out. He just found the way to work and study at the same time.

In spite of the circumstances mentioned above, in 1958, he enrolled in literature classes at Chico State College, in California. He wanted to be a writer because of his early reading of novels and magazines about fishing and hunting. We already know that at Chico State College, the novelist John Gardner was his professor. Ray learned from Gardner the art of writing, and he became a mentor having a great influence on Carver's career. He qualified Gardner as the man who taught him about the integrity and honesty of fiction, about getting everything right, down to the commas, about the agony and difficulty of "a writer's values and craft." (Weber) Carver's writing style improved considerably under Gardner's supervision. Straightaway, Ray started to live his dream with the writing of his first stories. "Furious Season" was the name of a story written by Carver while a student at Chico State College in 1961. This story was later to be included in his collection called as the story with another of his early works, "Pastoral," in 1977.

In the Paris Review, Carver let us know more about his first short story and poem he ever wrote:



It was a story called “Pastoral” and it was published in the Western Humanities Review. It’s a good literary magazine and it’s still being published by the University of Utah. They didn’t pay me anything for the story, but that didn’t matter. The poem was called “The Brass Ring,” and it was published by a magazine in Arizona, now defunct, called Targets. Charles Bukowski⁴ had a poem in the same issue, and I was pleased to be in the same magazine with him. He was a kind of hero to me then. (Simpson and Buzbee)

With the appearance of this story, Ray’s writing style was beginning a long journey to become an authentic representation of him as a unique writer. But one thing is certain; he always had the proficiency to produce masterpieces because of his awesome creativity he own since a short age.

Further along, he continued his studies at Humboldt State College. There, he met Richard Cortez Day, and under his stimulus he continued to write his poems and short stories. Dick, as he was called, said that Ray was not the center of the class, but his dedication called his attention. “He was never one to go to the center of any kind of activity. I always thought of him as one who would skirt around the edges but would over-hear all kinds of things, never miss a nuance,” Dick Day said. (Halpert 5) Day helped Ray to develop his best qualities as a writer. However, Day recognized that the craft of fiction was adopted by Carver from Gardner. “He learned the discipline of edition, of cutting, of getting it right. Of course Gardner tried to impose his vision on Ray, but it was the craft of fiction that he learned from Gardner.” (Halpert 2) So, by the time Raymond became Day’s student, he already had his writing techniques and style

⁴ Henry Charles Bukowski, or Heinrich Karl Bukowski in his language, was a German-born American poet, novelist and short story writer.



defined as a consequence of Gardner's influence. But Ray kept adding and omitting various writing characteristics during his student life, and he surely acquired a considerable number of techniques from Day's classes, too.

His studies continued in Iowa at the Iowa Writers' Workshop during 1963. Donald Justice, his professor of poetry in Iowa, said "I had read some of his stories and poems, and I thought he was very talented, but I didn't realize, and I'm not sure anyone did, how good he was going to be." (Halpert 7) Nevertheless, Ray did not stay long at the Workshop – he only stayed one semester. During those years of constant preparation, it was clear to all Carver's professors the ability and aptitude of this young student. They knew this was a student with a greater potential than others.

In the mid-1960s, among Carver's large list of cities in which he lived, he and his family moved to Sacramento, California. There, he briefly worked at a bookstore and then as a night custodian at Mercy Hospital. He was attending classes at what was then Sacramento State College, including workshops with the American poet Dennis Schmitz.⁵ They soon became friends, and Carver's first book of poems, "Near Klamath," was later written and published under Schmitz's supervision. (Gentry and Stull) These events happened before Ray's first short-story collection was published. He was more a poet than a short-story writer in those days.

In most of his life as a student, Raymond Carver's poems and short stories were published in magazines and newspapers, to try his luck. "One day, I had a short story taken at one magazine and a poem taken at another. It was a terrific day! Maybe one of the best days ever. My wife and I drove around town and showed the letters of acceptance to all of our friends. It gave some much-needed validation to our lives," he

⁵ Dennis Schmitz was Carver's teacher of poetry at Sacramento State College.



said. (Simpson and Buzbee) For a beginner, it is a predictable reaction. He was given the chance to get published and to continue with his writing career, and with his increasing popularity, his motivation went up. All the work that was being written showed the enormous potential owned by Carver, though it was not receiving the merited attention. Despite this fact, his first and own collection of stories was about to get recognition.

1967 was a milestone year for Carver because of the appearance of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” a short story, in Martha Foley’s annual Best American Short Stories anthology⁶ and the impending publication of *Near Klamath*⁷ by the English Club of Sacramento State College. Great attention and recognition was received by this first collection, and with it, Ray’s fame increased throughout the American country.

Raymond Carver’s career as a short-story writer started when he was still a student, but with the publication of his first collection of stories, “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” he became widely known in the American country. The year of its publication was 1976, and in a short period of time, this book was giving a lot to talk about. The stories in this collection say a great deal about what Ray’s style was at the beginning. Carver himself affirmed that the stories were not as elaborate as the stories in his later works. That is why he was marked as a “minimalistic” writer. However, some stories of his second collection also had these characteristics. For instance, “The Bath” was originally included in “What We Talk about when We Talk about Love,” Carver’s second collection. This story had many characteristics of what was called “minimalism.” But Carver decided to rewrite it, adding more detail and giving it a well-developed

⁶ The series began in 1915, with Edward O’Brien as editor, but when he died, he was replaced by Martha Foley.

⁷ “Near Klamath” was Raymond’s first book of poetry, published in 1968.



ending. The new version of “The Bath,” retitled “A Small Good Thing,” appeared in his later collection, titled “Cathedral.” Indisputably, Carver was trying to implement a more expansive style in his later stories. These early collections mark the starting point of his short-story writing career; despite the fact that he already had two published books of poetry before it.

Continuing with his academic preparation, he briefly enrolled in the library science graduate program at the University of Iowa, that summer, but returned to California following the death of his father on June 17, 1967. Subsequently, the Carvers relocated to Palo Alto, California, so he could take his first white-collar job at Science Research Associates, where he worked occasionally as a textbook editor and public relations director through 1970. The blue-collar jobs which Ray had known during his whole life, picking tulips, pumping gas, sweeping hospital corridors, cleaning toilets, and managing an apartment complex, were gone. This period of his life also marked a change in his work since many of his stories acquired other characteristics besides the ones of his early published collections, and many other topics got his mind.

This period in Carver’s life had a lot of other characteristics. We know that he had to work and study at the same time, but his addictions and desires to write also took a considerably part of his time. Moreover, his academic preparation and economic problems took him and his wife and children to many parts of the country. They sought for a better life, but wherever they lived, things did not improve.

Among their several journeys, city to city, in 1968, they got as far as Israel because Maryann Carver enrolled in a state-sponsored program for students abroad. Raymond thought this was the perfect opportunity to create a writing environment on



the Mediterranean; however, he did not write anything on the trip. On their return, the Carvers repositioned to San Jose, California. They tried to catch up on the life they left before the journey. Maryann Carver finished her undergraduate degree, whereas he would remain enrolled in the library science program at San Jose State through the end of 1969, failing to take a degree once again, like he did in Iowa. Nevertheless, he established vital literary connections with Gordon Lish, an important character in his professional life. Lish was Carver's editor at Alfred A. Knopf⁸ for "What We Talk About" and "Cathedral." Because of Lish editions, Carver's work became greatly affected. Another important literary connection Carver established was with George Hitchcock, a poet and publisher. During this period, they helped Carver with the publication of many stories of his work.

Gordon Lish became an important character in Carver's work because he edited many of his most famous stories. He started publishing Carver's early stories in Esquire Magazine. As Carver's editor, many of the renowned stories were corrected and published by Lish. He did not just edit the stories, but rewrote them creating something very different from what Carver intended. It soon led to the speculation that the most important characteristics of Carver's work were added by Lish, and that he was the reason why the stories were so great. Because of that, and after a so long, Tess Gallagher decided to stop the speculations. Consequently, "Beginners," a new collection containing Ray's manuscript version of his 1981 short story collection "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," published by his widow in 2009. Then every reader was the witness of Ray's greatness expressed by his own handwriting.

⁸ Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. is a New York publishing house, founded by Alfred A. Knopf, Sr. in 1915.



On the other hand, Gordon Lish always believed in Carver's capacity to create masterpieces. "He's an important writer from any number of standpoints," he said. "Carver's way of staging a story, staging its revelations, is, I think, unique. Carver's sentence is unique. But what has most powerfully persuaded me of Carver's value is his sense of a peculiar bleakness." This comment rightly places Carver in the peculiarly bleak tradition of Sherwood Anderson and Carson McCullers.⁹ (Weber) According to this critique by Lish, Raymond's themes are what stressed his great ability for writing. Back then, nobody wanted to hear or even think of reading something about second-class citizens – often called freaks. But Carver decided to write about them after all, and did it so exceptionally that it made him gain great acceptance.

Following this event, Raymond started getting deeper into the writing world of America via little magazines and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. A trace of it was the publication "Neighbors" in Esquire Magazine with the help of Esquire editor, Gordon Lish, in June, 1971. As a consequence, at the instigation of Lish, Carver began to teach as a visiting artist at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This was really helpful for Carver since it took him to teach many writing techniques at recognized universities. That also helped with his economic situation.

To continue with his career, he received a Stegner Fellowship to study in the non-degree graduate creative writing program at Stanford University during the 1972-1973 periods. While studying at Stanford University, he cultivated relationships with contemporaneous colleagues Chuck Kinder, Max Crawford, and William Kittredge.¹⁰

⁹ Sherwood Anderson's and Carson McCullers' stories also referred to a world of loneliness and despair.

¹⁰ Chuck Kinder, Max Crawford, and William Kittredge were all American novelist who became close friends with fellow student Raymond Carver at Stanford. They made up this group at Stanford were Max



The friendship enabled the Carvers to buy a house in Cupertino, California. From then on, as we have said, many universities required his service for teaching. It was then that, in addition to his position at Santa Cruz, he got another teaching job at the University of California, Berkeley that year. Those days gave him excellent opportunities to get known in the literary world, but also to improve his financial situation. He got to teach at many universities around the country. For example, he eventually became a full-time faculty member of the creative writing program at Syracuse University in New York, in 1980.

As a result of the publication of his first short story collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, which appeared in 1976, Carver's popularity began to rise. During this time, many readers admired him, since they discovered his great ability for writing. Many of his great masterpieces started to be awarded. This led him to be nominated for the National Book Award,¹¹ though it sold fewer than 5,000 copies that year. The important fact at this point of his career was the increase of popularity of his work. His collections were better sold in the upcoming years, and people wanted to know what would be the next story he would write.

Nonetheless, the growth of his career was about to be abruptly stopped because of his biggest mistake. The fact that he had to try different jobs, bring up his children, and attend writing classes led him to continue drinking heavily. He said "I suppose I began to drink heavily after I'd realized that the things I'd wanted most in life for myself and my writing, and my wife and children, were simply not going to happen." (Simpson

Crawford was considered as the most political man of the group because of his degree in economics. Among them, Ray was the first one to die, followed by Max in 2010. The other two writers are still alive.

¹¹ In the United States, the National Book Awards are a set of annual literary prizes. At the final "National Book Awards Ceremony" every November, the National Book Foundation presents the NBAs and two lifetime achievement awards to authors.



and Buzbee) When that occurred, things went downhill for Carver. He admitted that he dedicated more time to drinking than to writing. One of Carver's drinking partners was the famous John Cheever. As we mention above, in the fall semester of 1973, Carver was a visiting lecturer in the Iowa Writers' Workshop with John Cheever, but Carver stated that they did less teaching than drinking and almost no writing. His problems led him to find a refuge in alcohol. Somehow, this darkened the life of this great character of American literature, but it also would give him a lot to write about, since the majority of his stories have something to do with alcohol.

Because of his drinking problems, he was hospitalized three times between June 1976 and February or March 1977. The problem with drinking got so far that this was about to kill him; however, all his trials were about to be over. It was on June 2, 1977, and with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, when Carver stopped drinking for once and forever. That day was called by him "the line of demarcation" in his life. (Weber) This line marked the transition point between his two lives, the bad and hopeless, and the good and successful.

Carver felt proud of his quitting drinking. "In the last 15 months before I quit drinking," he said for The New York Times Book Review, "I was hospitalized once and I was in a detox center, a drying-out clinic, three times. I was in pretty serious shape. For all intents and purposes, I was finished as a writer and as a viable, functioning adult male. It was over for me. That's why I can speak of two lives, that life and this life." (Weber) Things had to get to extremes to make him stop drinking. When asked about his worst experiences in his drinking days, Carver did not tell what they were, but he only said "It's very painful to think about some of the things that happened back then. I



made a wasteland out of everything I touched. [...] Let's just say, on occasion, the police were involved and emergency rooms and courtrooms." (Simpson and Buzbee) It must have been difficult to fall to the bottom as hard as he did, but he was able to climb to the top again. Immediately, when he felt better, he was ready to write the stories that would consecrate him as the greatest American short-story writer of his time.

Carver's two lives were used as topics for many of his writings. His then new stories would talk about characters facing the problems presented in his two lives.

Yet, things were not completely solved for Ray. He continued to smoke marijuana and experimented with cocaine at the request of Jay McInerney¹² during his 1980 visit to New York City. Fortunately, he found a way out of his addiction before things got worse; however, those dark days would later get revenge. Probably, he would have died from drinking at a shorter age if he had not found help for his addictions.

Once sober, Ray immediately started to write the stories which would be included in his new collection, "What We Talk about when We Talk about Love." This book appeared in 1981 and attracted even more audience than his previous collection.

The collection that appeared after "What We Talk About" was what would mark a complete change in Carver's style and themes. He implemented a more expansive writing style and hopeful themes. That was why in 1984, Carver was chosen again for his third major collection, "Cathedral." Included in the collection are the award-winning stories "A Small, Good Thing", and "Where I'm Calling From". At this point, his collection got international fame. John Updike¹³ selected the latter for inclusion in The Best

¹² Jay McInerney was Ray's student of creative writing at Syracuse University in New York.

¹³ John Hoyer Updike was an American novelist, poet, short story writer, art critic, and literary critic, who is remembered for his Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom series. He edited "The Best American Short Story of the Century" in 2000 where Carver's stories were included.



American Short Stories of the Century. Therefore, some stories that Carver include in this acclaimed collection were among the best of the century. That was something completely incredible for a writer who was almost unknown a few years before this collection appeared. According to Carver, “Cathedral” was a defining moment in his career when he moved towards a more optimistic and confidently poetic style. Like a Phoenix, Ray revived from the ashes. Not long before, Raymond Carver had hit bottom, having been nearly defeated by recurring domestic and financial troubles, and having, over a prolonged period of alcoholism, nearly drunk himself dead. “My life had just sunk to a vastly low state,” he said. “I was a goner.” (Weber) Fortunately, he was given a second change and the opportunity to live a new life.

Despite Carver’s fame, his personal life had reached its lowest point. Maryann divorced him though she said she loved him, but, for her, it was too much to live with an alcoholic. Just before his fame increased, his wife abandoned him, so in his new life, he had another woman by his side. The new sweetheart he had found was the poet Tess Gallagher. She became his companion and later his wife. They married only weeks before Ray lost his fight against lung cancer, though they lived together since the beginning of his first life.

Those were the important aspects that marked the period in which Carver prepared himself to be a writer. So, in sum, we can appreciate that, in spite of Carver’s problems, he was able to solve not only his personal life, that is his problems with alcohol, but also he could regain his greatness and ability for writing fascinating stories again. Moreover, the preparation he received during his life as student gave him the implements for writing proper and better stories every time. He was already born with



the passion and the aptitude to create masterpieces, and the additional ingredients to create a great story writer were added by fascinating and renowned authors, and good and bad experiences that were what gave him the topics to write about.

2.1.3 Raymond Carver's Marriages

Adolescent and father are two words that can perfectly describe a person of our time. At the age of 18, these two words were used to describe Raymond Carver, as well. This figure of American literature knew in a hard way what it was like to have a family at a young age. The person who shared her life with him and gave him two children was Maryann Burk, Ray's first wife. Maryann supported her husband in every possible way in his career and his personal life, but their story did not have a pleasing end.

Somehow, Raymond enjoyed his adolescence, but things changed radically before he could finish his teenage years. He got married at the age of eighteen, while his wife, Maryann Burk, was only 16. They met in 1955 while Maryann was working as a waitress in the coffee shop where Ray's mother worked in Union Gap, Washington. "She was 14. When she and Carver married, in 1957, she was two months shy of her 17th birthday and pregnant. Before turning 18, she discovered she was pregnant again." (King) This is what Stephen King tells us in his article in The New York Times. We cannot be assured about Maryann being Ray's first love, but once they met, they fell in love. She got pregnant, and that led them to marry at that very short age.

Thus young Raymond had two children, a girl and a boy, before he turned 20, Christine La Rae, in December, 1957, and Vance Lindsay, the next year. As a



consequence, he tried many jobs, as a janitor, a sawmill laborer, delivery man, and library assistant. So we can only imagine how hard it could have been to be him. He attended classes at night at the same time that he had to work hard for his children. This led him to a state of poverty. All those problems also led him to look for a refuge in drinking. He became a heavy drinker when his situation became worse.

Not only Ray but also his wife had to try many jobs to survive. “For the next quarter-century she supported Ray as a cocktail waitress, a restaurant hostess, an encyclopedia saleswoman, and a teacher. Early in the marriage she packed fruit for two weeks, to buy him his first typewriter.” (King) These lines explain how great Maryann’s love for her husband was. She always supported her husband, despite the little attention Ray paid to her.

Additionally, there was another factor that characterized their marriage. This factor stayed with him all his life, and it was caused for his father. He left to Raymond Jr. the characteristic of moving very frequently. In a New York Times article, Stephen King noted that “through most of those early years of restless travel, he dragged his two children and his long-suffering wife, Maryann, [...] behind him like tin cans tied to the bumper of a jalopy that no car dealer in his right mind would take in trade. It’s no wonder that his friends nicknamed him Running Dog.” (King) Those hard days for his family became worse as the years passed by. When he could not find a solution to his problems, he would try to solve them by moving to another city, but things did not improve.

Principally, Carver’s drinking problem only got worse. “As brilliant and talented as he was,” King continued, “Ray Carver was also the destructive, everything-in-the-pot



kind of drinker who hits bottom, then starts burrowing deeper.” (King) The little money they had was used to buy whisky. This is a classical situation lived by many alcoholics, and Ray was not the exception.

“It was Maryann Burk Carver who won the bread in those early years, while Ray drank, fished, went to school, and began writing the stories that a generation of critics and teachers would miscategorize as ‘minimalism’ or ‘dirty realism.’” (King) His wife had no other option but working because Ray was too busy to help her. He was not a good man inside, though he always acted as an educated and respectful person. His voice was so soft and gentle that no one would guess he had a serious problem with alcohol and was aggressive when he drank.

During Carver’s drinking days, he spent the little time he had to produce amazing stories. But, on the other hand, the mother of his two children was on the edge of failure.

Being married, having two children, working, and attending night classes were too many problems not only for him, but also to Maryann. At this point in his life, young Raymond started acting like his own father who also found a way out of his problems in drinking. Possibly, now that he lived his father’s story, he realized that he had to find a way out as soon as possible. Ray managed to stop drinking several times, and he finally reached that goal before meeting his second wife, in 1977. However, it was too late for Maryann and him. “We tried hard, but time finally ran out on us,” he said. “It was an indelible experience. I’ve circled around it many times in my work. It’s not the only thing I write about, but it’s true I’ve circled around that in one way or another.” (Kellerman, For Raymond Carver, a Lifetime of Storytelling) That situation was so bad that it made it



hard to overcome the problems, and in the end, it just ended in a bad way – he lost the person who was with him in the good and bad days.

All of Carver's mistakes soon led him to a predictable end. His marriage with Maryann ended. In the spring of 1977, Carver had separated for the last time from the woman who had been his wife since he was 18 and she was 16. He was living alone; on money he had borrowed from her, in a rented house in McKinley Ville, California. Moreover, he was separated from his two children; he was broke and unemployed. To make things worse, his first collection of stories, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" had been published a year earlier, and had even been nominated for a National Book Award, but sales and royalties were insignificant. Because of that, "he hadn't written a word since." (Weber) Although it is true that his addiction to drinking was overcome by then, it was too late for him and his wife. It was a hard decision for Maryann because she said she loved him more than anything or anyone in the world.

"Ray and Maryann were married for 25 years, and it was during those years that Carver wrote the majority of his work. His time with the poet Tess Gallagher, the only other significant woman in his life, was less than half that." (King) The first collection contained many more stories than the later ones. So Maryann gave him everything she could, but she received so little from her partner. She continued working to earn a living, and Ray's work would be beneficial for her, too.

All the pictures of this period of Raymond's life are the same that can be found both in his father's life and his stories. That was what he decided to tell with his masterpieces – he showed what he lived.



Recapitulating, Ray's first marriage marked a wonderful period of his life, despite the difficulties that we already know about. He never realized the great woman he had by his side, and how much she loved, except when she was gone. Something interesting we noticed is that in many of the stories Carver wrote after divorcing, ex-wives are very often mentioned. Having lost his wife was surely something greatly influential in his emotional life. Thus this period was significant because of all the stories and poems he was able to write at that time. Back then, Raymond made a big mistake, but, somehow, that was what made him achieve such great fame.

2.1.4 Raymond Carver's Second Marriage and Death

Raymond's life with Maryann was long gone and he felt the necessity of keeping going with his career, once again. Though it is true that he needed some help and support, he never planned to get them from another wonderful woman. This time the poet Tess Gallagher became his companion, and she helped him to continue writing, once he had overcome his drinking addiction and his failed marriage.

This new woman in Raymond's life was born in Port Angeles, Washington, on July 21, 1943. Like Ray, she had studied the art of writing at many universities and tried her luck with the publication of her poems. But it was after meeting him that her popularity increased.

Carver met Gallagher at a conference in Dallas, Texas in November, 1977. By the time they met, he had been sober for only five months. After a long time since their meeting, in Port Angeles, Tess explained us what it was like meeting her future husband. She described that "he seemed very awkward and fragile." She also said that



she “was actually kind of apprehensive to meet him after hearing stories about him!” She continued, “you know, they called him Running Dog – he’d get himself into certain troubles and then he would have to run to get out of there.” Because of that, he had to move very frequently, though he did not always find a way out of his problems in other places. Tess added that the day they met, “he wanted to make a phone call, and he asked if he could use the phone in my room, and I thought, ‘Oh my God, I hope he doesn’t make a pass at me!’” She laughed when saying that she did not want to disappoint him. “I’d be so sad to have to turn him down, he’s so sweet! Thankfully, he just really did want to use the phone.” (Wood) This meeting marked the beginning of a lovely friendship, but later it turned to love. At that time, he was trying to continue with his life, and he found a person who understood him in Tess. The advantage in their relationship was that both were writers, and they were interested in one another’s work, because Raymond had written a lot of poems early in his life. Both of them surely had a lot to share and talk about.

According to the number of marriages, as between Tess and Ray, she was the winner. Raymond married twice in his life, while Tess had Raymond as her third husband. It was unexpected, since she was about five years younger than Ray. By the time they met, she knew what the process of getting divorced was, while Ray was just preparing the papers to end his previous marriage for the first time. She said she had been married to a pilot and to a poet. Her two previous marriages had failed because her first husband “went to Vietnam and was transformed by the war, and the second was an alcoholic whose poetry found fewer readers than hers did.” (Wood) Something interesting about Tess is that she had a forth sweetheart. Of course, this happened after



Ray's death. He was "Josie Gray, an Irish painter who had not touched a paintbrush until he met her." (The Observer Magazine 22) Therefore, Tess was always looking for company when the previous relationship came to an end. But back then, when Ray was still breathing, she found something different in his personality. For her, he was so sweet, gentle, and "somebody who loved life, and didn't want to live back in the rubble of past lives that had failed." (Wood) So he became a completely different person from what he had been. Like the rest of people who were impressed by Carver's work, Gallagher admitted that she fell in love with his writings, first. Besides, her anxiety to meet a famous character of literature made her get closer to him, and finally, she decided to marry him.

Two years later, after the conference in Texas, they moved and lived together in El Paso, in the same state. This was the beginning of another constant moving from city to city, though this time they moved less frequently than he did before. Furthermore, Tess had a lot of concerns because of the first life Ray had lived not long ago. She was a little afraid that living with him would be like living one of his stories, those stories that talked about loss, hopeless situations, problems, and broken relationships. At the beginning, it was so; she paid his bills and gave him her study to write, while she tried to write in the garden or somewhere else. In the end, she got sick. "Listen," she told him, "I love you. But I did not come 4,000 miles across this country to get bad luck. My luck is good, and I want it to stay that way. You'd better change your luck." (Wood) From then on, things changed, and Tess received the position she deserved in the house, after all; she also wanted to have more help and fewer troubles.



The next year, in 1980, they traveled to Syracuse, where Gallagher had been chosen the coordinator of the creative writing program at Syracuse University in New York. There, Carver taught as a professor in the English department. Thus, they felt the need of acquiring a place to live on their own. They bought a house in Syracuse, at 832 Maryland Avenue. In the subsequent years the house became so popular that there were interviewers, students, and admirers at the door, who wanted to meet the famous couple. To prevent all the unwanted visits, they had to hang a sign stating “No Visitors.” They started doing this to get some peace while working.

Two of the lucky interviewers who got to enter their house in New York were Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee,¹⁴ for the Paris Review. They described the house as “a large, two-story, wood-shingled house on a quiet street in Syracuse, New York. The front lawn slopes down to the sidewalk. A new Mercedes sits in the driveway. An older VW, the other household car, gets parked on the street.” (Simpson and Buzbee) In addition to the sign, they said that “sometimes the phone is unplugged, and the sign stays up for days at a time.” Tess Gallagher said, in her essay called “Instead of Dying,” that “at ten o’clock without fail every night, Ray would unplug our telephone. He didn’t want any of his ‘boozed up’ friends calling us, breaking in on our peace.” (Literature Wales 2) Most of the interviews were held while the “No visitors” sign was not up. Then everybody who was not allowed to come before was welcome. The couple was always kind to their visitors, once they had finished their work.

In 1982, Carver and his first wife, Maryann, were finally divorced. He let Maryann go and planned to make his relationship with Tess legal. After living almost ten years

¹⁴ Mona Simpson is a novelist and a professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. Lewis Buzbee is a San Francisco based author and poet.



together, Carver married Gallagher in 1988 in Reno, Nevada. By that time, Ray's health was much deteriorated.

On the year of Carver's death, 1988, The New York Times published an article written by Stewart Kellerman describing Ray's final battle against lung cancer. He wrote that on September 1987, "Mr. Carver, like the character in the story, began spitting up blood. He had cancer, and the doctors cut out two-thirds of his left lung last fall. Then he had a relapse, and he recently finished a course of radiation therapy." (Kellerman, For Raymond Carver, a Lifetime of Storytelling) Having lost part of his lungs, Ray still did not intend to give up. He said, "I was terrified at first. Then I decided to fight it and beat it. But I get so awful tired. I thought I'd bounce right back, be my old self. But it doesn't work out that way. It takes time. It's bloody frustrating to feel yourself so whipped out. But I'm going to make it. I've got fish to catch and stories and poems to write." (Kellerman, For Raymond Carver, a Lifetime of Storytelling) As seen, he won the first battle, but the war against cancer was not over yet. He wanted to survive and that was why his death-date was not 1977, but the beginning of his new and better life. He kept fighting till his last day, and despite his desire to live, nobody could save him from his already known ending.

Though they had a relatively long life together, the year 1988 represents more than just their wedding anniversary. It is also the year of Carver's death. It was only six weeks after the marriage, on August 2, 1988, that he died in Port Angeles, Washington. He died from lung cancer at the age of 50, and his death was the result of his bad days when he used to drink and smoke heavily.



The news of his death was soon widespread. The New York Times published another article the day after his death declaring that “Raymond Carver, a poet and short-story writer who chronicled the lives of America’s working poor, died of lung cancer yesterday at his home in Port Angeles, Wash. He was 50 years old.” (Kellerman, Raymond Carver, Writer and Poet Of the Working Poor, Dies at 50) The news was surely surprising and unexpected for all the people who knew him, and generally for the American literary world.

In the same year, Raymond Carver was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. It was a great honor for the most influential short story writer of the 80s.

Carver was dead, but he remained more alive than ever in the minds of the people. His amazing work and his legacy to the new generation will never let him die.

Gallagher got to know her husband perfectly. She was completely aware of Carver’s previous life. She even wrote an essay about her husband, putting emphasis on the great admiration she had for him. The essay she wrote initially appeared at the Academi Intoxication Conference in 2006. It was called “Instead of Dying.” This speech was inspired in her husband’s life. She started by saying that:

Instead of dying from alcohol, Raymond Carver chose to live. I would meet him five months after this choice, so I never knew the Ray who drank, except by report and through the characters and actions of his stories and poems. One of the beautiful results of his decision to stay sober was that he became an internationally respected master of the short story... (Literature Wales)



These few lines show more than the simple fact of Carver's addiction being ended; they also show how different Carver's first life was from the second one. He was a new man who looked like one never having touched a drop of alcohol. This was what the closest person to him at the time said. She added that "for me, the best result of his choice for life was that we found each other, could write and live together, becoming first-readers for each other's work, challenging, inspiring and supporting one another in this new life we created day by day." Apparently, they matched in every aspect of their life together.

It is true that a great number of people were influenced by Raymond's work. However, there is one particular person who let herself get influenced by him directly. Her widow, Tess Gallagher, ended up being more than a poet. She also wrote essays, and short stories as a result of Carver's influence on her once they started to live in the same house. "Tess Gallagher has written many books on other topics, but her relationship with Raymond Carver has really come to define her career." (Lehmann) That was the best inheritance received by her husband. Even though Tess could not enjoy more than six weeks with Carver as her husband, her best memories helped a lot with her writing career.

Marrying an acclaimed writer like Raymond made her fame ascend rapidly. People became interested in her work and wanted to know who this poet was and what she had written. But the main channel of her increasing popularity was her writings about her husband. In her book of poems, "Moon Crossing Bridge," published in 1992, she poured out her heart by enumerating in great detail the stages of her sorrow after losing her love. "Moon Crossing Bridge" is a series of sixty poems that centers on the



theme of loss and grieving prompted by the death of Carver.” (Poetry Foundation) She confessed to have suffered for the loss of her beloved Raymond. It was both a tragedy and a blessing. A tragedy because she had to see her beloved Ray die, and a blessing because of the great popularity her poems about Raymond got.

“I went very, very deeply into the disappearance of my companion and love, Raymond Carver, in ‘Moon Crossing Bridge,’” she said when interviewed by Daniel Bourne. Her loss became her inspiration, and thanks to her, Ray’s feelings and desires were widely known.

Today, the great short-story writer can be visited by anybody at Ocean View Cemetery in Port Angeles. This city became Carver’s last home after a life of constant moving, city to city. The inscription on his gravestone states these words:

LATE FRAGMENT

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth. (Literature Wales 2)

This is the final poem that Carver wrote in his life. These words express the only thing that Raymond Carver really looked for all his life. Like everybody on earth, he just wanted to be loved. Now that he is gone, the awards, credits, and tears do not mean anything for him. We can also “experience the condition of his heart, his acceptance of



himself as someone who'd met his demons eye to eye, who'd vanquished them - with the help of others and by grace." (Literature Wales 2)

The visitors can also find his poem "Gravy" in the inscription. The poem goes like this:

GRAVY

No other word will do. For that's what it was. Gravy.

Gravy, these past ten years.

Alive, sober, working, loving and

being loved by a good woman. Eleven years

ago he was told he had six months to live

at the rate he was going. And he was going

nowhere but down. So he changed his ways

somehow. He quit drinking! And the rest?

After that it was all gravy, every minute

of it, up to and including when he was told about,

well, some things that were breaking down and

building up inside his head. "Don't weep for me,"

he said to his friends. "I'm a lucky man.

I've had ten years longer than I or anyone

expected. Pure gravy. And don't forget it." (Literature Wales 1)

As can be noticed, it talks mainly about his victory over alcohol. It is also a picture of the ending of what he called his "first life" and the beginning of his "second life." June



second, 1977, was a date he was so proud of. “I’m prouder of that, that I’ve quit drinking, than I am of anything in my life. I’m a recovered alcoholic. I’ll always be an alcoholic, but I’m no longer a practicing alcoholic,” he said. (Simpson and Buzbee) This is what Ray said whenever a person asked him about his success over alcohol. 1977 could have been the year identified as the date of Carver’s death because no one thought he would escape alive from his addiction. But he was always thankful to have lived ten more years. That was the biggest gift that life had given to him.

These words in the inscription seem to speak to the person that reads them. They are a comfort for the feeling of loss for having lost not only the writer, but also the father, the husband, the friend, and the inspiration for thousands in many parts of the world. Everyone will remember him as the greatest American short story writer of his time, of any time.

2.2 Carver’s Writing Procedures

“Stories don’t come out of thin air,” Carver once said. (Stull) For him, there must be a program to follow in order to write what is known as a masterpiece. Though there are universal steps to write short stories to keep an eye on while working, every writer has particular habits for working, and, in many cases, that is what makes him a good or a bad writer. A writer may become big because of his habits before, during, and after writing a story, that is, his procedures.

Writers usually have habits for writing their works. There is also a lot of superstition involved in this process. Some writers may have a favorite typewriter, a specific writing hour of the day, and even habits while writing, like smoking, drinking, or



even listening to music that helps them get relaxed. However, Carver's habits were a little more flexible. He said that he loved it when he was writing, though "sometimes I don't even know what day of the week it is." (Simpson and Buzbee) Sometimes, he did not touch his typewriter for months, and the next months could be full of writing activities. This fact gave him the freedom to write at the time that he felt inspired, in order to do a good job. The importance of writing at the time one feels more inspired is because pressure can be a negative factor at the desk.

To begin with the creation of a great story, first, one has to establish the perfect conditions to write. A quiet, private, and relaxing environment where one can concentrate on the topic to be developed is essential to produce a good story. Carver affirmed that "it's important to me to have my own place. Lots of days go by when we just unplug the telephone and put out our 'No Visitors,' sign." However, the place does not always matter if the environment is quiet and relaxing. Any place having a peaceful environment is great to write. Carver continued that "for many years I worked at the kitchen table, or in a library carrel, or else out in my car. This room of my own is a luxury and a necessity now." Once a person gets used to a specific and familiar place, in many cases, it is necessary to go there and start writing. The fact that Carver worked at the kitchen table did not affect his writing because he needed to work to improve his conditions of life. He probably had no other option than writing there, but it was not a problem, since it surely was the quietest place among others having little comfort.

Once established the perfect conditions, writers need to be relaxed and have a lot of patience, to write every story over and over again. Carver surely had a lot of patience, and it helped him greatly in the process of writing, checking, editing, and



rewriting. He said “I’ve learned to be patient and to bide my time. I had to learn that a long time ago.” (Simpson and Buzbee) The lack of patience could be the weakest point of a writer because the process of writing is not easy at all, and takes a lot of time. It was something acquired by Raymond early, during his first days as a writer. Forcing one’s mind, when ideas do not flow, may greatly affect the final result.

When Carver had established the perfect conditions to focus on writing, he started with his work; therefore, let’s analyze the way a story emerges. First, there is the spark that makes a writer choose a certain topic to write about. In Carver’s case, he said that some of his stories had something to do with his personal experiences, and that is why we first had to consider his life, to understand a great deal of his work. However, not all his own biography constituted the basis of his work, but only a part of this. It is true that many autobiographical elements can be found in his work; the stories refer mainly to some experience, not necessary his, which left a mark on his emotions. In plain words, not all his work talks about himself. For him, it was not necessary to use his own experience as topics to write about, but also something he heard, or did, or saw, and then he tried to transform it into a story. As a result, in his stories we can find a little autobiography, but also a lot of imagination.

The spark came, in many cases, from experiences of other people. For writing the story “Fat,” for example, he based it on an experience his first wife had at work. He said that she “worked as a waitress, and she came home one night and told me she had had an enormous man for a customer who spoke of himself in the first person plural: ‘we would like some bread ... ‘We are going to have the dessert Special.’ That struck me; I found that extraordinary. And that was the spark that gave rise to the story.” (Stull)



The experience of his wife established the image, or spark, as he called it, to create from it a story, so it started to take shape. The first step was given, although this is a process that takes time, because there are still a lot of decisions to make in order to create the perfect conditions for the story to be written.

As a further example, let's consider the way the idea for the story called "Why Don't You Dance?" reached Carver's mind. In this acclaimed story by Carver, the image was also established by an interesting experience told by someone else. It was not something he lived, but something he heard:

I was visiting some writer friends in Missoula back in the mid-1970s. We were all sitting around drinking, and someone told a story about a barmaid named Linda who got drunk with her boyfriend one night and decided to move all of her bedroom furnishings into the backyard. They did it, too, right down to the carpet and the bedroom lamp, the bed, the nightstand, everything. There were about four or five writers in the room, and after the guy finished telling the story, someone said, "Well, who's going to write it?" I don't know who else might have written it, but I wrote it. Not then, but later. About four or five years later, I think. I changed and added things to it, of course. (Simpson and Buzbee)

Certainly, it was an excellent experience to write about, and there is no doubt that more than one of his friends thought so. Consequently, now that the basis of the story was clear, Carver had to create and establish the most appropriate conditions to tell it. There were a lot of things to be changed and added, and surely every one of them



wrote it according to their own background, experiences, and style, producing, as a result, very different stories.

Something interesting about this story is the fact that it was the first story Carver wrote in his second life. He had written a lot of stories before and during his drinking days, but “it was the first story I wrote after I finally stopped drinking,” said he. Thus, it is a good example to be taken into consideration in order to compare the stories he wrote in his first and second lives. What we will surely find is a more optimistic story, because of the great change in Ray’s life.

All these examples have been chosen to create a picture of the way a story appears in the mind of a writer like Raymond Carver. The spark we talked about was not always involved with his own experiences. The reviewed examples told us that a great deal of what Ray wrote originated in other people’s experiences.

Of course, all the events and trial he had to go through during his life gave him something to write about. That is the reason why we considered the instances bellow to highlight the stories coming from Carver’s own experiences.

First of all, we are already familiar with the drinking life that Carver lived during a great part of his adulthood. We have also discussed Carver’s stories talking about drinking. However, it is important to clarify that Carver’s drinking life was never an inspiration for his writings. Those stories were never patterned on his own experience as a practicing alcoholic. His work is called fiction for one reason, and the reason is that the stories did not really happen, and they contained more imagination than real-life elements. For example, to write “A Serious Talk,” he was based on only one single line he had heard. Drinking is involved in this story only because he was drunk when he



heard the line. This was all he took from the real world to make the story, and this means that the whole story is pure fiction. On the other hand, other writers such as Cheever, whom we mentioned as Carver's influencer, said that all he wrote was autobiographical. For him, the spark was every event that happened in his life. This was possibly true for Cheever, but for Carver, the majority of what he wrote came from his imagination. In his interview for the Paris Review, this theme of discussion is clarified by him. What he said was this:

The fiction I'm most interested in has lines of reference to the real world. None of my stories really happened, of course. But there's always something, some element, something said to me or that I witnessed, that may be the starting place. Here's an example: "That's the last Christmas you'll ever ruin for us!" I was drunk when I heard that, but I remembered it. And later, much later, when I was sober, using only that one line and other things I imagined, imagined so accurately that they could have happened, I made a story—"A Serious Talk." (Simpson and Buzbee)

As we have said, this time the spark for the story is this line, "That's the last Christmas you'll ever ruin for us!" It is amazing how Carver was able to tell us so many things from one single line, but he could do it, and that is what good writers do. For them, every situation is a potential story to write about. Therefore, imagination is another very important characteristic of a good writer. Imagination is the third characteristic mentioned in this investigation, so, in the same way, we will continue



highlighting important aspects to have present at the desk when writing, especially, when writing fiction.

To start writing, one has to keep in mind more than rules or techniques; one has to write about anything he considers important, or what one knows better than anything else, that is, one's own life. Nevertheless, there is a danger in doing this. Carver advised us not to base all our writing on our real life. He said that there is a tendency that has to be overcome in order to be considered a good fiction writer. Everyone wants to be heard and understood, and this usually leads us to a need to write about our own life and all the important things we want to share about it. Autobiographies are good, but not as good as works based on fiction. Carver said that "a great danger, or at least a great temptation, for many writers is to become too autobiographical in their approach to their fiction. A little autobiography and a lot of imagination are best." (Simpson and Buzbee) The imagination gives particular characteristics to writings, and in most cases, that is what people look for in stories. With a lot of imagination, the characters in the story can do what we want them to, and they can reach a happy or sad conclusion according to our will. We can make them do what nobody expected, or what none thought could happen. On the other hand, a story based on an autobiography is too predictable. In Carver's case, his biography would be all we need to understand his writings, and the truth is that we need it for more than that. His stories are unpredictable, and at any time there may be a twist in the story that changes what we thought would happen next. Literature is a medium used to entertain, and it is not used to inform what happened in one's life.



Once the theme of the story had been established by Carver, the next thing to do was to discover the best way to tell it. This is a conscious decision, and an author can choose the best and most appropriate method for his story. In “Fat,” once he knew what his story would be about, he tried to decide who would narrate the events. “I decided to write from the point of view of the waitress, not my wife, but the waitress,” he said. (Stull) Once again, he tried to leave everything out that would make the story appear as a personal experience – his wife’s experience in this case. For that reason, it is the waitress - any waitress - who describes the situation she found herself in while attending that fat man. Another writer could have thought that the point of view of the fat customer would have been the best way to tell the story. But it is just a matter of perspective, and Carver’s perspective is the one we are interested in. Certainly, the perspective used to tell a story does not affect it as much as the lack of imagination. Any point of view can give a great story as a result, as long as the events are creative and unpredictable.

Another aspect that is important to contemplate is the tense in which the story will be written. Taking one more time “Fat” as example, Carver chose to write it in the present tense. He did it though not many of his stories are written using this tense. “The four or five stories I published last year in The New Yorker are in the present tense. I don’t know why. It’s a decision I made without knowing why,” he said when asked about his decision to write the story in that tense. (Stull) Usually, when telling a story, many authors prefer to do it in the past tense, because they are developing a situation that took place some time ago. So, for the majority of writers, choosing the right tense for a story does not cause too much trouble because they are predetermined to write in the



past tense. Despite this fact, Carver chose the present tense for some of his stories without even intending to do so. It is the writer's particular decision, and it may vary from one person to another though the tendency is to write in the past tense.

Considering these little aspects before writing, the work has to be started. Once the first word has been written, it is important not to stop, and to let the ideas flow. It is true that writers are like artists. They follow their own instinct and feelings to create a masterpiece, and the way they create a good work can greatly differ from person to person. In Carver's case, he just let the ideas come out, so he wrote as much as possible, to later extract the most important ideas and organize them. So, taking into consideration all the points seen above, it is time to start writing what one has planned. Carver just used to write as much as he could, in order to finish the first draft. Nowadays, this technique is called "free-writing" and is used to collect initial thoughts and ideas on a topic previously well established. The advantage of it is leaving all the grammar and spelling out to focus only on the subject of a story. This technique is widely used by a great number of prose writers because of its efficiency. About this technique, Carver's words explained us that "I write the first draft quickly. [...] This is most often done in longhand. I simply fill up the pages as rapidly as I can." (Simpson and Buzbee) That is the basis of this technique, filling the pages with all the important ideas of the story. Nevertheless, the initial point is sometimes the easiest stage of all. This is because the first draft never does more than establish a pattern to follow. "With the first draft, it's a question of getting down the outline, the scaffolding of the story," said he, in order to let us know that this first stage does not have to be perfect. "Some scenes," he continued "I have to leave unfinished, unwritten in some cases; the scenes



that will require meticulous care later. I mean all of it requires meticulous care—but some scenes I save until the second or third draft, because to do them and do them right would take too much time on the first draft.” (Simpson and Buzbee) After the first draft was finished, the story had to be carefully analyzed because there are a lot more ideas to be put into the context of a story, and irrelevant ideas to be taken out. The real work begins with the second draft, when a writer starts checking and correcting lots of things considered wrong.

While writing the second and third draft, Ray said that “when I’ve finished the longhand draft I’ll type a version of the story and go from there. It always looks different to me, better, of course, after it’s typed up. When I’m typing the first draft, I’ll begin to rewrite and add and delete a little, then.” (Simpson and Buzbee) It was then that the story started to take shape, and most of its characteristics would remain intact until the story was published, but, of course, many other features, dialogues for example, would be changed or deleted. “The real work comes later, after I’ve done three or four drafts of the story,” he said, and this is true for most experienced writers. To have an idea of how much dedication Carver put into his stories, let’s consider his words declaring that “if the first draft of the story is forty pages long, it’ll usually be half that by the time I’m finished with it. And it’s not just a question of taking out, or bringing it down. I take out a lot, but I also add things, and then add some more and take out some more. It’s something I love to do, putting words in and taking words out.” (Simpson and Buzbee) Experienced writers are always really careful with their work. Irrelevant and repeated ideas that can ruin the story are identified at this stage, and that is why it is so important to learn how to rewrite and proofread our work. Great writers can even write a story over and over



again, up to a hundred times, and the final creation is really different, almost unrecognizable, from the initial draft. Carver said that Donald Hall,¹⁵ an American poet, once told him he wrote one hundred drafts of his poems. He must have been really meticulous with his writing, and we can just imagine how different his final draft was like. Of course, that is too much effort for only one poem. For another poet, the work would be considered finished after the tenth or twentieth draft. Therefore, in order to summarize, a writer has to develop the good habit of checking and correcting what he has written before considering it a done work. Writing always improves, as long as we dedicate the appropriate time to it. In his experience, Carver had to go through this process a lot of times. He had to check and correct a story about twenty or more times and also there were certain stories that needed about fifty drafts to finally be ready for their publication.

An important characteristic of Carver's stories to be taken into consideration is the way he ended a story. When we started reading his first stories we were left with a feeling of uncertainty about what really happened at the end of them. We were not really sure about what happened with the characters because the story seemed unfinished to us. Nevertheless, there is an explanation for this fact which we let him tell us. "For the ending, a writer has to have a sense of drama. You don't miraculously arrive at the ending. You find it in revising the story. And me, I revise fifteen, twenty times. I keep the different version..." (Stull) So a writer arrives at the end of the story while revising and rewriting it many times, always keeping the emotion. It was an intentional decision taken

¹⁵ Donald Hall is the author of over 50 books of several genres from children's literature, biography, memoir, essays, and including 22 volumes of verse. Early in his career, he became the first poetry editor of *The Paris Review*, from 1953 to 1961, a prominent quarterly literary journal, and was noted for interviewing poets and other authors on their craft.



by Carver for the readers to establish their own opinions about the events of the story. However, this abruptness tends to leave the reader unsatisfied, and in many cases it resulted frustrating, though this was never his intention. Carver was right to create that kind of ending because he thought of the reaction the readers would have; he tried to write a story that did not have all its content visible to elicit the readers' imagination. Carver did it because many readers predict what the story is about by reading its ending, or its title, in some cases, but Carver's stories need to be read from the first word to the last in order to be completely understood. About this, he said "the story ought to reveal something, but not everything. There should be a certain mystery in the story. No, I don't want the reader to be frustrated, but it's true I create an expectation and don't fulfill it." (Stull) Naturally, he did not need to explain everything to the reader in his stories, since some events in a story are more than obvious. For instance, in the story "Little Thing," Carver wrote this line for the end: "In this manner, the issue was decided." This seemed like a confusing line and a bad end for a story, but knowing that, in the story, a couple was arguing over a baby, and they were pulling on opposite arms, it is clear what had happened. In the same way, lots of stories require all the reader's attention to make clear what really happened at the end of the story.

The way a story ends is a particular decision of each writer, what varies is the style that each one uses to reach it. Two different writers with different experiences and opinions about the same topic may end their writings in very different ways, and both of them can be excellent endings. What is important, according to Carver's words, is to keep the emotion and to stimulate the imagination of the reader. This is a significant characteristic for a writer to have, as essential as the others mentioned above, because



this is the real purpose of writing literature. We want to create something that entertains the audience and amazes it, with a great story to read.

Continuing with his explanation, Carver told us that he “put in a lot of hours at the desk, ten or twelve or fifteen hours at a stretch, day after day. I love that, when that’s happening. Much of this work time, understand, is given over to revising and rewriting. There’s not much that I like better than to take a story that I’ve had around the house for a while and work it over again. [...] I’m in no hurry to send something off just after I write it, and I sometimes keep it around the house for months doing this or that to it, taking this out and putting that in.” The hard work of writing, rewriting, revising, editing, and improving a story becomes easier when one loves what he is doing. So, as we can notice in Carver’s explanation, writing is a job that one has to love in order to do it, since we need a great deal of patience to rewrite a story over and over again. A writer has to be ready to spend hours correcting the work because it is then when all his qualities and skills have to work together. Besides, it is like playing with words and giving them the right place within a story. Spending so many hours at the desk is something that would easily bore or drive a common person crazy but writers love it. This can be a good explanation why not everybody is a good writer. Among the thousands of writers that have existed throughout history, few of them have reached the recognition of the world, and because of their outstanding work, it is not possible to beat one of them.

Furthermore, patience is really required when correcting writings; however, it is not enough to be patient to become an excellent writer. Patience has to be engaged with the act of proofreading what one has written, no matter how many hours this can take. We have seen above, when Raymond explained to us his reasons for writing short



stories, that usually a story could be written in one sitting. This was a characteristic that Carver had during his whole life. Nevertheless, it was not the writing of the first draft which took more time; the post-writing part always took longer. This is what he said, “it doesn’t take that long to do the first draft of the story; that usually happens in one sitting, but it does take a while to do the various versions of the story. I’ve done as many as twenty or thirty drafts of a story. Never less than ten or twelve drafts.” (Simpson and Buzbee) Writing thirty drafts of a story is a lot, because most people suggest writing five or just a few drafts for a story to be considered ready. Common people tend to make even fewer drafts, since they think three drafts for a story are more than enough. But for Carver, this was not sufficient. He said he never wrote less than ten drafts, so now we can imagine how hard the writing process is, but, of course, it is not impossible.

Proofreading is a characteristic that good writers always have as an indispensable tool. They permanently check what they have done before publishing it; however, excellent writers, the ones that receive more attention, do more than that. They can spend days, weeks, and even months correcting their work in order to improve it. And this is true only for short-story writers and poets. Novelists usually spend years writing their stories because the process of editing is longer in long writings. Sometimes, they do this till the last minute before the writing is published. For some of them, the work still looks unfinished even after its publication. This is the case of one of the most highly acclaimed stories by Carver, “The Bath”. This story was included in his collection “What We Talk about when We Talk about Love.” This was first published in a magazine, and later included in this acclaimed collection; nevertheless, Carver never thought of it as a finished work. When he was asked about his opinion of “The Bath,” he



said “the story bothered me. It didn’t seem finished to me. There were still things to say [...] I looked at ‘The Bath’ and I found the story was like an unfinished painting. So I went back and rewrote it.” (Stull) He gave the story a new ending that looked more positive for his audience. Everybody, including Carver, agreed that “it’s much better now.” (Stull) The result of this decision was the appearance of “A Small Good Thing” in his next collection of stories, “Cathedral.”¹⁶ Therefore, proofreading has to be constant and a habit to be acquired early in life and developed during the rest of it. “The Bath” surely went through this process a lot of times, and the last time that Carver checked the story, it radically changed. In order to summarize what we have said, let’s highlight that this step has to be present in all stages of the writing procedure, and Carver has shown us that a story can always be improved.

To conclude, it is important to know that Carver was a great writer because he had great characteristics and habits when writing. “Stories don’t come out of thin air. There’s a spark” that initiates the writing process, and it has to be developed in the best possible manner, to write something worthy to read. These habits are not acquired overnight, and have to be enriched as days pass by. It took a lot of time for Carver to create such masterpieces; therefore, patience was one of his most important qualities. Moreover, he owned common techniques to write, and every writer knows them, but he was born with unique skills to write, and in each step he had the opportunity to write even better.

¹⁶ These two stories, “The Bath” and “A Small Good Thing” are the subject of much debate about Carver’s career. They can be taken as examples of Carver’s writing style, writing habits, and even Carver’s two lives. And still, these stories have so many things to say about their author. Therefore, we will continue analyzing, comparing, and contrasting them.



Another important thing to keep in mind is the content of the story. A story rewritten a hundred times is not better than a story having a really entertaining tale that has been checked just ten times. Writing a great story is just a matter of creativity that each person needs to express. Let's remember that everyone has his or her own style of writing. And finally, the sense of drama that Carver talked about should never be missing in fiction. For most people Carver's stories seemed unfinished, while many others considered it was his biggest quality. Now we know that he did it intentionally, to create a feeling of expectation in the readers, so they could not predict the whole content of the story. All the characteristics briefly reviewed in this investigation were what made Carver an acclaimed figure of literature. Becoming a great writer is not a big secret owned by few people; it is only hard work, dedication, and love of writing.

2.3 Carver's Collections of Short Stories

Once we have analyzed and understood a great deal of what were Raymond Carver's personal life, academic preparation, and writing habits, it is time to focus on his work – his short stories, specifically. All these factors converged in these incredible stories. His most acclaimed short stories were included in various collections, and we already know some of them. So we will consider the collections individually, to be able to understand every story within them.

As the main point of this investigation, it is our job to analyze thoroughly the stories, considering the topics, style, and their effects on readers. However, it is true that the review of his personal life and writing career have already given us a good idea



about the subjects of his stories. So it will surely become an easier job, as long as we keep in mind everything about Carver's life and career previously seen.

During his whole life, Ray kept developing and polishing his writing abilities, to give as a result great masterpieces that have been the admiration of many people and created different opinions against and in favor of the themes of the stories. Controversial or not, the themes of the stories have been the key point that caught the attention of people, so he was right in choosing that kind of themes because he intended to get as much attention as possible. "Mr. Carver became well known for his stories portraying the lives of those he called "the working poor," a critic wrote. (Stamler, Media Talk; Esquire Editor Helps Uncover Carver Stories) He made famous the stories of those who were almost never mentioned in literary works. "The working poor" had voice in Carver's stories, and not only the stories about them made a good story, but the way Carver told them.

Moreover, Carver succeeded at doing what others failed to do. Choosing to write short stories was an unexpected decision since short stories were dying at the time that Raymond decided to use this kind of writing. For some reason, writers found short stories a less attractive kind of writing than poems or novels. Many of Carver's professors at college were mainly novelists, so he felt the necessity to adapt the theories for writing novels to his own and unique procedures to write short stories. Let's remember that his short stories were written as fast as he could, but he never left the important writing points out. On the contrary, he did his job so carefully that the stories he wrote are considered perfect by many people.



It is clear for us why he chose to write short stories; therefore, it is time to analyze his production and see how good he was at the art of writing.

At the beginning of Raymond's career, he started to write stories about love, loneliness, despair, and problems in relationships. Certainly, they were not seen as good topics to talk about by people, for they referred to a world that nobody wanted to hear or even think of. But, in spite of his contentious themes, people became interested in the stories, and they were fascinated by the way in which he developed a tragic situation. When asked about his themes, he said that he chose to write about people who do not succeed because their lives are as valid as the lives of successful people. He added that "people worry about the rent, their children, and their home life... That's how 80-90 percent or God knows how many people live. I write stories about a submerged population, people who don't always have someone to speak for them." (Stull) This was his explanation for choosing that kind of topics in his writings. He was completely conscious that most of the people living in America would be reflected by the characters of his stories, since it was their own common experience for them to live a constant struggle to survive. He said that about 80-90 percent of people lived in those conditions, so this statistic helped him to understand that he was not the only one living a state of poverty. For instance, Ray was not the only janitor in the country, or his wife the only waitress who worked for her children. As a result, the problems faced in Carver's own life were more common than he thought.

From Carver's point of view, the characters in his stories are just fighting to live a life without too much trouble. It is like they were in a constant pursuit of happiness, and most of them would never find it. Carver wanted to show the real world, though his



critics blame him for not showing a more smiling face of America, since his work was widely read overseas, too. However, due to his life's changing, the stories in his last collections were more optimistic than those in his previous work. The characters were fighting to overcome their problems, and in the end, many of them manage to get a better life. Once again, his own life was symbolized in that shift of thought. Let's remember that he and his family lived in poverty, so the lower class was a topic he knew very well.

Carver tried to explain and let people know why writing about the lower class was relevant for him. He said for the Paris Review that his characters are always trying their best, though they are not always succeeding. But the fact that they do not succeed does not mean that their lives are worthless or insignificant to write about. This is what he said then:

I think they are trying. But trying and succeeding are two different matters. In some lives, people always succeed; and I think it's grand when that happens. In other lives, people don't succeed at what they try to do, at the things they want most to do, the large or small things that support the life. These lives are, of course, valid to write about, the lives of the people who don't succeed. Most of my own experience, direct or indirect, has to do with the latter situation. I think most of my characters would like their actions to count for something. But at the same time they've reached the point—as so many people do—that they know it isn't so. It doesn't add up any longer. The things you once thought important or even worth dying for aren't worth a nickel now. It's their lives they've become uncomfortable with, lives they see breaking down. They'd like to set things right,



but they can't. And usually they do know it, I think, and after that they just do the best they can. (Simpson and Buzbee)

We know that everyone has lived a similar situation at some point in life. Therefore, it is possible to be identified with the characters in the stories Ray tell us. We know what it is like to fail because it is not possible to always succeed at the things we want to do. Nevertheless, failure is not the main point to talk about, but the way one tries and keeps trying, till getting to the goal one wants. Certainly, that is what life is all about. Every person in the world, it does not matter who, dreams of getting something he or she really wants. People want to know that they are not the only ones who are trying. They want to be heard and understood, and others to know what they have been through. The journey is always more important than the end or the start of it. That is what Carver knew and tried to communicate with his stories.

The major themes in Carver's stories refer mainly to common people trying to live a normal life, but there are obstacles that prevent them from achieving their principal goal. "In many of Carver's stories, issues of loss and of alcoholism are a part of the larger issue, which is the isolation and terror of people when a total breakdown of survival systems is at hand." (Jones) For many of them, the situation they found themselves in is so impossible to come through that they have no choice but to accept. This is also something that happens every day, not only to Carver's characters, but to anyone of us. Naturally, the situations developed by Carver are something that not everybody agreed with. "The near-inarticulateness of his characters in the face of this terror and loss is significant and has been a major point of contention among his critics." The different points of view given on this topic have led people to support and criticize



him. “Some say that Carver’s characters are too ordinary, under-perceptive, and despairing to experience the philosophical questions of meaning into which they have been thrust.” The people that affirm that care only about the social class that the characters belong to and think these people cannot have experiences like the ones related by Carver, but the truth is that they really do. “His defenders say that Carver characters demonstrate that people living marginal, routine lives can come close to experiencing insight and epiphany under pressure of intruding mysteries, such as the death of a loved one.” Surely, anyone can experience these situations, not only rich or important people. That is what Carver really intended to communicate, and it is not clear for those who criticize him. He wanted to give voice to people who were forgotten by the rest of the world.

Moreover, when reading Carver’s stories, there is something that always looks familiar to us, and to any reader who is acquainted with his life. In his early days, he had no luck to get what he wanted. He seemed to be on the edge about to fall even lower and there was no way out of his problem. The great majority of them are found in his stories. Somehow, his books are like journals where Carver expressed what it was like to life in the kind of world. For example, cities, places, jobs, life circumstances like a broken marriage, and other factor lived by Carver himself can be found in his fiction. A critic said that:

Much of Carver’s fiction sounds like that life, the first one, life as he no longer lives it. His characters, more often than not, are hapless, in the sense that their lives are without luck. They are married or not, employed or not, sober or not, solvent or not - but whatever the situation, things are in a state of undoneness.



Hearing Carver speak about the demise of his first life, you know where the stories come from. His speaking voice sounds suddenly like his writing voice, deadpan, sparse, short on exposition and long on resignation. (Weber)

Another strong critique of Carver's characters was made by Paul Barrett.¹⁷ He declared that "his characters were violent and depraved, adulterous and alcoholic, depressed and displaced, yet readers sensed Carver's deep concern for them, a tenderness beneath the brutality." Those are strong adjectives to give to a person that is just a victim of the cruelty of society. Frustration, pressure, and anger can easily turn a quiet person into a "violent and depraved, adulterous and alcoholic, depressed and displaced" person, as Barrett called them. Let's not forget that writing about these people was the way Carver let others know his preoccupation for the ones living such problematic lives. Moreover, what is clear in this critic's mind is that "his portrayal of hard, quiet lives led in drab kitchens and living rooms would practically come to define American short fiction for decades." (Barrett 1). At first, this critique sounds a little disappointing for it expresses the negative side of a developed country. But it is the real situation of modern America, and Carver just wanted people to know about it.

It is important to stress that Carver's characters are not completely immersed in a world of failure. The way the characters are able to fix a little part of their lives is something positive to recognize in his work. These violent people are present in the real world, and they sure want more comprehension and less marginalization.

Once we have understood what Carver's stories are about, that is his themes, it is time to talk about the style he used to write his short stories.

¹⁷ Paul Barrett is one of the executive editors at California Northern Magazine, which is biannual printed, based in Sacramento, California.



His unique style to develop a situation was a little different at the beginning of his career, though it would mark him forever. In his early years as a writer, he used a lot of what is called a “minimalistic” form of writing. The dictionary defines the term “minimalism” as “a style or technique (as in music, literature, or design) that is characterized by extreme sparseness and simplicity.” (Merriam-Weber Incorporated) Among other definitions, we found one given by Frederick Barthelme, an American novelist and short story writer known for his “minimalistic fiction,” who said that as a minimalist “you’re leaving room for the readers, at least for the ones who like to use their imaginations.” (Jones) This definition partly coincided with Carver’s perception of short fiction, since Ray also tried to let the imagination of the readers fly in each story. However, Carver thought of minimalism as something that limits the imagination of readers, and what he was doing was promoting this imagination. As a result, he never considered himself as a “minimalist” writer.

Minimalism is something like a buzzword in modern American literature. John Barth, also a novelist and short story writer from the American country, defines this term as follows:

...the principle (one of the principles, anyhow) underlying (what I and many another interested observer consider to be perhaps) the most impressive phenomenon on the current (North American, especially the United States) literary scene [...] I mean the new flowering of the (North) American short story (in particular the kind of terse, oblique, realistic or hyper-realistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction associated in the last 5 to 10 years with such excellent writers as Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie



Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robison and Tobias Wolff, and both praised and damned under such labels as “K-Mart realism,” “hick chic,” “Diet-Pepsi minimalism” and “post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early-Hemingwayism”).” (Barth Section 7; Page 1, Column 1)

Barth’s words give us a complete definition of what was considered “minimalism” beyond dictionary definitions and speculation about its meaning. This is what most American writers are talking about, young writers above all. All the labels given to writers using this form of writing, including the term “Dirty Realism,” have arisen from this new wave existing in the country, to which Raymond Carver belonged.

Many people consider Carver as the father of minimalism and inspiration for younger writers. Nevertheless, Ray never liked the idea of a minimalistic writing style since his justification for the short development of a situation is due to other factors. When asked about traces of “minimalism” in his later collections of short stories, Carver said that “critics often use the term ‘minimalist’ when discussing my prose. But it’s a label that bothers me: it suggests the idea of a narrow vision of life, low ambitions, and limited cultural horizons. And, frankly, I don’t believe that’s my case. Sure, my writing is lean and tends to avoid any excess...” (Stull) Everyone who has read any of Carver’s stories can affirm that the stories have a lot of imagination. So, since a narrow vision of life is what “minimalism” really means, Ray hated to be qualified with that adjective. For him, the minimalistic stories represented smallness in effort, development of a situation, and imagination, and surely he put in a lot of that when writing each of his stories.

Among the authors mentioned above, Frederick Barthelme, John Barth, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robison, and



Tobias Wolff, the majority had different perceptions of “minimalism.” And, certainly, their perceptions were even more different from the critics’ ideas of the term. For them, short stories are more than short writings requiring little effort to put pen to paper. Barth added “like any clutch of artists collectively labeled, the writers just mentioned are at least as different from one another as they are similar. Minimalism, moreover, is not the only and may not be the most important attribute that their fiction more or less shares; those labels themselves suggest some other aspects and concerns of the New American Short Story and its proportionate counterpart, the three-eighth-inch novel.” (Barth) So we arrived at the conclusion that short stories represent so much more than a story told in few words; the smallness in content means that a story does not reveal everything, and more attention has to be paid when reading it. There are a lot of questions that the reader may wonder about when reading, and those questions can only be answered if the appropriate concentration and imagination are used to read. To avoid so much discussion, one can just sit and read Carver’s, or any of these authors’ works, and then be the judge.

Some may think that it was Carver’s lack of experience that led him to write stories which looked unfinished, for his audience. But the truth is that he actually intended to create that feeling in the readers, and so get something more with his stories, for example, a personalized ending. Whatever the reason was, his readers had a hard time trying to figure out what had happened at the end of the story. However, it also gave the readers the power to imagine and establish their own ending, according to their own experience.



It is true that there is a great difference between his first collections of stories and his later ones. Everyone can notice it. That difference was due to a great number of factor he had to face in his two lives. This is because Carver's two lives were really influential in his writing. Therefore, it is time to analyze his work considering this difference in style and content, between his first and later collections of stories.

2.3.1 Early Collections of Stories

In Carver's first years as writer, he was completely busy doing many things that included not only writing, but also working, studying, raising children, and even drinking. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine what his life was like in those early days, and we are familiar enough with this life because of the previous analyses. However, despite all the responsibilities that Ray had, he never neglected his writing. All his written stories, from the first to the last, were glorious and recognized by thousands, and they were written before, during, and after his so-called bad days. Thus it is time to go deeper into the analysis of his stories, starting with his first stories published in "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" Another collection of stories written during his early years as a writer was "What We Talk about when We Talk about Love." These were the books Carver published during his hard days and, despite this fact, the stories in them are so great that people started setting eyes on him after their appearance.

Before we start talking about Carver's first published collection, we can easily recall some stories mentioned above that were written in those early days. "Pastoral," for example, was his first story ever published in the *Western Humanities Review*.



“Furious Season” was another of his first publications that, later, would give its name to a new collection of stories published in 1977. So it is important to know more about the content and style of all the stories that appeared at the time to understand why Carver’s themes have been the subject of so much debate. Moreover, we feel curious to know what these early stories were like and what differentiated them from the stories included in later collections.

Besides the first two acclaimed collections, there were some stories that were not included in them, but they also were part of Carver’s big creations. Some of them were included in a third collection that received the name of “Furious Season,” a new collection that was published in 1977, one year after the publication of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” in 1976. The stories in this collection included Carver’s first stories, such as “Pastoral,” and obviously the story that named the collection, “Furious Season,” among others. However, this small collection is almost never mentioned among Carver’s major collection, that is why we will focus only on the stories in the big collection of stories.

2.3.1.1 Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976)

A great number of Carver’s early works were included in his first book, which contained his most acclaimed stories of the time. This collection was published in 1976, and Carver decided to give it the name of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” the name of the last story in the book. By the time Carver resolved to create this collection, he had already written more than 30 stories, and many of them had been published in magazines and newspapers. Other stories, on the other hand, were written exclusively



for the collection. Moreover, some stories of the collection were considered such real masterpieces that some of them received recognition. For example, the story that names the collection, “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” was included in *The Best American Short Stories*, in 1967. So it was a really successful and luxurious collection, for all the great stories included in it. Therefore, it is surprising, considering that those were Carver’s first steps as a fiction writer. There were still so many stories to be written in the upcoming years.

The stories included in this acclaimed collection were written during what Carver called his “first life.” We already know that this “first life” was characterized by his taking care of his two children, working at blue-collar jobs, and attending writing classes. Because of that, Carver worked really long at writing the stories that would be part of the book. It took more than a decade for all the stories in the collection to be finished, for he was busy attending to all his duties as father and writer. The first story of the collection written by Carver was “The Father,” and he started writing it in 1960 and finished it in 1961. Likewise, the last story of the collection that he wrote was “Collectors,” in 1974. So he took 14 years to finish his first book. The book finally appeared in 1976, two years after the last story was finished.

At first sight, the fact that Carver took so long at writing his first book is not understandable, because one of his reasons to write short stories was that he could get immediate economical results. So why did Carver wait so long to finally get the economical results of this book? Well, he actually did not wait that long, because most of Carver’s stories were first published in magazines and newspapers. That was the way Carver made quick money to help his family. For example, “Will You Please Be



Quiet, Please?” made its first appearance in the Martha Foley Collection in 1967. Moreover, “Neighbors,” another great story, was accepted by Esquire Magazine for publication in 1971. (Sklenicka 272) The publisher was Gordon Lish, who would become a close friend and his editor for the upcoming stories. This was a great step taken by Carver, since this magazine was read in the whole country; therefore, his writing career started to take shape.

The complete dates in which all the stories in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” were written are represented in the following chart:

Year	Stories
1960-1961	“The Father”
1960-1963	“What Do You Do in San Francisco?”
1964	“Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”, “The Student’s Wife”, “Sixty Acres”
1967	“How About This?”, “Signals”, “Jerry and Molly and Sam”
1970	“Neighbors”, “Fat”, “Night School”, “The Idea”, “Why, Honey?”, “Nobody Said Anything”, “Are You a Doctor?”
1971	“What Is It?” (“Are These Actual Miles?”), “What’s In Alaska?”, “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes”, “They’re Not Your Husband”, “Put Yourself in My Shoes”
1974	“Collectors”

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_You_Please_Be_Quiet,_Please%3F



Some stories that were included in the collection were written when he was still a student at Humboldt State College, before he graduated in 1963. After that, he held various jobs over the next four years. It was one of the causes that made Carver lose writing time, but other factors also contributed to make him take so long. The dates in which the stories were written represented hard times for Carver. For example, the chart above indicates that “How About This?,” “Signals,” and “Jerry and Molly and Sam” were written in 1967; however, this was also the year when Carver’s father died. His father’s death was an event that really affected his emotions, and there is no doubt that this affection was reflected in his work. In the next three years, Carver did not write any short story, but only poems and essays to remember his father. The poem “Photograph of my Father in his Twenty Second Year” mentioned above was written during this period of grief for his loss. To make things worse, 1967 was also the year when the Carvers filed for bankruptcy. Drinking also became a serious problem, and finally reached the end that we already know. Among the dates when the stories were written, 1973 was the year when Carver attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and, as we can see, this year was not very productive. It was then that Carver and Cheever spent their time in Iowa doing nothing but drinking. Thus, now we can have a clear idea of what were those years like, and how his personal life influenced his career.

There is a curious characteristic of the stories in the collection that are listed above that attracted our attention. The titles of some stories are in question form. For example, “What Do You Do in San Francisco?” “How About This?” “Why, Honey?” “What Is It?” “What’s in Alaska?” “Are You a Doctor?” and other titles are questions. It is as if Carver tried to catch the readers’ attention by creating an emptiness to be filled by



reading the story. He said that readers' often predict what the story is about by reading the title of it; therefore, it was his way to prevent the reader from doing that. Only by reading the story would the reader know the nature of the question and its answer. This was something Carver did especially with the stories in his first collection. None of the other collections have a title expressed as a question, except for "Why Don't You Dance?" in "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love."

About the style in which the stories were written, many contemporary authors considered this collection as an initial text of minimalist fiction. This is because the plot is short and, at first sight, it seems simple and unfinished. Since we have seen what this term means, it is clear that Carver used few words, but they would require much imagination, and that is what he mainly cared about. For Carver and others, the fact that the stories are simple is everything but truth. In The New York Times Book Review, Geoffrey Wolff, a novelist and critic, said that these "are brief stories but by no means stark: they imply complexities of action and motive and they are especially artful in their suggestion of repressed violence." (Wolff) So what Carver wanted was to innovate and renew the short story by creating an original style to write his fiction, but his proposal was so misunderstood that many people called him a "minimalist" writer. And so, "Carver was at first the most influential practitioner of minimalism, and then, through the rewriting of his earlier stories, a writer who repudiated the style." (Jones) Many critics called "minimalist" when referring to his work as a compliment, but he thought it was not a good adjective to qualify him or his work.



Mr. Wolff,¹⁸ in his critique, also referred to the themes of the stories in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”

In most of these 22 short fictions, the objects of Raymond Carver’s close attention are men and women out of work, or between jobs, at loose ends, confused and often terrified. If they are kids, they play hooky. Husbands and wives lie beside each other in bed, touch cautiously, retreat, feign sleep, lie, each bewildered by what has just happened and by what might happen next. The stories themselves are not at all confused; they have been carefully shaped, shorn of ornamentation and directed away from anything that might mislead.”
(Wolff)

Now Carver’s biography, his first life particularly, is really helpful to understand what the stories in this collection are all about. Though it is true that his life is not really represented in his work, it can help to understand his feelings and concern about the marginalized classes. He talked about them because he was completely conscious of the situation of those people, as he was one of them, since he was born in a place lacking comfort and having plenty of misery. During his lifetime, Carver and his first family lived through two bankruptcies, and both of them occurred in this period, before the publication of his first collection. The first one was in 1967, and the other in 1974, because Raymond and even Maryann became what he called a “full-time practicing alcoholic.” (Halpert 58) This fact is helpful to comprehend a great deal of Carver’s themes, and there are others that strongly influenced his writing. Another negative point

¹⁸ Geoffrey Wolff is American novelist, essayist, and biographer, whose younger brother is the writer Tobias Wolff.



in his first life was the fact that he moved a lot with his family, so he had to write wherever possible, for example, the kitchen table, or the garden.

As a consequence, Carver's initial stories were directly influenced by his own life. However, it is important to keep in mind that fiction writers intend to create fake stories that are closely linked to the real world, though none of them really happen. That is why his work is near to the real situation of thousands in mid-century American suburbia, but none of his characters can be found in the real world. And because of the themes that express the harsh reality, he was included in a movement called "Dirty Realism," whose meaning we are familiar with.

In order to clarify everything we have been talking about through all the pages of this investigation, we have to take our time to read and get Carver's ideas directly from the stories. Therefore, it is time to review his work from inside, that is to say, inside the pages of his collections. For that reason, following the previous analyses, we will explain in short what each story is about.

2.3.1.1.1 Storyline Synopses

"Fat"

The waitress told her friend an experience she had while she was attending the customers. She realized that a fat man was sitting at the table. He was the fattest man she ever saw, and was amazed by the strange way he had to talk. He referred to himself in the third person plural. "...we will begin with a Caesar salad," he said. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 64)



Another curious thing about him was that he ordered almost everything on the menu, and by the time the waitress brought him more food, he was done with the food she gave him before.

In spite of all the food he ate that night, the fat man said that he had not always eaten like that. After the fat man had gone, the waitresses and her husband went home. He seemed shocked, for he kept talking about the man. When they got into bed, she felt like she was terribly fat when he was on her. She felt depressed and decided to lose weight instead of gaining it, as she intended before.

“Neighbors”

This story is about Billy and Arlene Miller, a happy couple who lived a few steps from Stones, Harriet, and Jim. Billy and Arlene envied the lifestyle and the social position of the Stones. One day, the Stones asked the Millers to take care of their apartment while they were away for business, so the Millers agreed to do it. That day, Harriet gave some suggestions and cautions about the care and keeping of the apartment. So Harriet asked the Millers to feed their little cat.

At night, after the departure of the Stones, Bill and Arlene entered the Stones' department in order to do what he had been entrusted. That night, Bill came in the Stones bathroom and found a container of Harriet's pills. Billy took some and after he also drank a cup of wine called Chivas Regal that was on the furniture. After having done all these things, he raised the cat's feeder and he rearranged everything that he had disordered.



The next morning, he went to work early, but he got up with unexplained energy, so he wanted to make love with Arlene. Billy came to his house and immediately he went to the Stones' apartment. He took some cigarettes, ate food, and occupied the bathroom. There was no reason for the behavior of Billy and his wife worried about it. So she decided to keep watching what he was doing in the Stones' apartment. His wife followed her husband to the apartment and found him playing with the cat. Living the Stones' life led them to increase their sexual desire, so they made love many times everywhere. It was like they were somebody else.

One night, they went into the Stones' house not knowing that they had left the key on their own house. As a result, they were stuck in there. Then the Stones came home, so the couple knew that their fantasy was coming to an end.

“The Idea”

After supper, a couple realized that their neighbor was standing outside his house to spy on his own wife as she undressed in the bedroom. At first, the woman who saw her neighbor did not know what he was doing, but she could not help but watch. The couple seemed confused at the incident that had been happening “one out of every two to three nights” for the last three months. (Carver, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? 12)

The woman was completely against the neighbor's behavior that said she would tell what she thought about that situation to the neighbor's wife the next time she saw her. But her husband did not agree the idea because he enjoyed watching his neighbor spying on his wife.



The woman prepared food, and as she scraped waste food into the garbage, she noticed the presence of ants coming from beneath the sink, which she tried to kill with spray to kill bugs. When she went to bed, the man was already asleep, and she imagined the ants again. She got up, turned all the lights on, started spraying all over the house, and looked out the window, horrified, saying "...things I can't repeat." (Carver, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? 15) The ants invading the house were used by Carver as a metaphor of the couple invading their neighbors' lives.

"They're Not Your Husband"

The story began when Earl decided to visit his wife, Doreen, who worked as a waitress. While Earl was sitting at the counter, he heard the conversation between two men who were commenting about Doreen's appearance. They thought Doreen was too fat. Earl wanted to defend his wife from the teasing of the men, but he decided not to do that, and went home.

The next morning, Earl was a little confused about the comments of the two men, so he suggested to Doreen to go to the gym and to go on a diet. She accepted the proposal because she felt insecure about herself. However, after losing weight, she did not feel better. She was not the same because she had not the same energy to work. Her friends were worried for her health and believed Doreen was sick. Some said she was too pale or she was losing too much weight. She told her husband what her friend had said and he answered that "they are not your husband." (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 49)



After some weeks, Earl returned to the place where his wife worked. He stayed there for hours waiting for someone to say something about the change in his wife, but nobody said anything. The other waitresses were wondering who this character was, “he is my husband,” Doreen said. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 52) Earl was a salesman, but he could not sell his wife this time.

“Are You a Doctor?”

Arnold Breit received a call from a woman while sitting alone in his house while his wife is away. This was a woman who was not his wife. He asked the woman how she got his number, and she explained that it was her babysitter who gave it to her. She hesitated and then asked his name. Arnold said he was about to hang up, and before he did, she revealed her name, Clara Holt. They kept talking and Clara thought they should meet and later she called back to repeat the suggestion.

The next afternoon, Clara called again and gave her address to him asking to go to visit her that night. Arnold decided to find out more about the woman, so he went to the address and found a young girl, Cheryl, at the door. She said her mother had gone to buy some medicine. Then Clara returned home with groceries and asks Arnold “Are you a Doctor?” He replied that he was not. She made Arnold a cup of tea as he explained his confusion at the whole situation. Then he decided to kiss her and go home.

At home, he found the phone ringing and heard his wife’s voice who told him “you don’t sound like yourself.” (Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 30) There was a



feeling of fear in Arnold because he did not want his wife to know what he had done with Clara.

“The Father”

The theme of identity was present in this story when a family of girls, Alice, Carol and Phyllis, stood around their new born baby in his blue basket. They talked about each of the baby’s eyes and lips, trying to work out who the baby looked like. “He doesn’t look like anybody,” Phyllis said. (Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 32) Carol, on the other hand, said that the baby looked like her father, but it only provoked Phyllis asking “who does Daddy look like?” (Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 32) They decided that his father also looked like nobody. The girls, with exception of the grandmother, looked at the father, who had turned around and was looking back at them with his face white and without expression. They had such a hard time working out the identities of the baby and their father that, in the end, they seemed to have no identity.

“Nobody Said Anything”

The story was told by a young boy who heard his parents arguing, so he said he was too sick to go to school. Home alone, he started to rummage through the bedroom of his parents, but he found nothing interesting. Once he got bored, he decided to go fishing to Birch Creek, that was not far.

On his way, he met a woman who offered him a ride on her car. He was impressed by the woman’s beauty, that kept thinking of her all the time to the point that



he began to fantasize about the women. At Birch Creek, he kept thinking of the woman when suddenly a strange green trout bit the lure.

The boy decided to go down the river to fish under a bridge before going home. There, he met what he considered an ugly boy who was behind a really big trout, so the boy offered his help to catch it. They worked together, and after many attempts, they caught the fish. It was a really big trout, and they started arguing about who would take the fish home. The narrator said he deserved the trout for he caught it, while the other boy said he saw the fish first, so it was his fish. In the end they split the trout and the boy took the head part to his parents.

When the boy arrived home, he found his parent arguing in the kitchen again, and thought the head of the big fish would impress them, and so they would stop arguing. But his mother was horrified, and his father said to "...throw it in the goddamn garbage!" (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 20) The story ended with the boy standing at the porch looking at the half of the fish. Somehow, it represented his home which was getting divided by the constant fights between his parents.

"Sixty Acres"

Lee Waite, a Native American Indian, received a phone call from Joseph Eagle who told him someone was hunting on his land. At first, Lee is not interested in going to check, but he went to his truck to check, in the end. What he found were two young kids shooting ducks. Lee came out of the bushes and pointed his gun at the kids. The kids were nervous and told him what he was going to do. Realizing that there was not much he could do, he told the kids to get off his land. Lee made sure that the kid got off the



land, but he thought he had to have given them a bigger scare. When he got home, he started thinking that leasing his land to a hunting club would be a good idea. There was a sense of doubt for Lee did not know if he was doing the right thing in leasing his land.

“What’s in Alaska?”

Jack finished work and, on his way home, he bought a new pair of shoes. He wanted to show the shoes to Mary, who said she had a job interview, and the company was going to offer her a job in Fairbanks, Alaska.

After dinner, they went to their friends Carl and Helen’s apartment to try out their new “water pipe.” (Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 58) They drove to the market to buy snacks, and then headed to Helen and Carl’s house where they tried out the pipe. Chips, dip, and cream soda were brought out, while they talk about Jack and Mary’s possible move to Alaska. Then Jack spilled cream soda on his new shoes and they were ruined. Moreover, there was an incident about Mary calling Carl “honey.” She also had put her arms around Carl’s waist, and though Jack had seen it, he did not say anything.

Hearing a scratch at the door, Helen let Cindy, the cat, in. Cindy brought a dead mouse and ate it under the coffee table. “Look at her eyes,” Mary said. “She high, all right.” (Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 66) Then Mary and Jack say goodbye and went home. On the way, Mary told Jack she needed to be “talked to, diverted tonight.” (Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 68) At home, Jack had a beer, and Mary used it to take a pill to sleep. Jack stayed awake in the dark hall when he saw a pair of small eyes, and picked up one of his shoes to throw. He sat up in bed



and waited for the animal to make “the slightest noise.” (Carver, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? 69) There was no animal there; it was only his mind making him face his fears of losing his wife.

“Night School”

A man told his story while he was out of work and living with his parents. His marriage had failed and his new girlfriend was out of town, so he went to a bar. There, he met two women, and one of them asked him if he had a car. He said that he had, but he did not have it with him. The women only wanted to be driven to their tutor’s house. They were not really interested in him. One of the women asked him what he did for a living, and he said he just attended school sometimes, and he also said he wanted to become a teacher.

The women asked for his car again and persuaded him to walk to his parent’s house to collect the car. He told the two women to wait outside while he went to the apartment to look for the car keys. He found his father watching a movie and told him he needed the car keys. He found out that his mother had the keys and realized that his father would not have given him the car keys anyway. He knew he was not going to give the women a ride.

After that, the man just stood in the hallway remembering a story about a man having a dream about a man having a dream. The man still stood in the hallway when he heard the women cursing him because they knew he was not coming back. When he got outside, the women had gone, so he decided to go to his friend’s apartment to have



a turkey sandwich. He had too much time for himself, so he tried all those things only because he had nothing else to do.

“Collectors”

Mr. Slater was waiting for the postman to bring a letter with a job-offer when someone knocked at the door, but he knew this was not the postman because he knew his steps. He was worried about opening the door because of debt collectors. This man at the porch said he was Mr. Bell. He was looking for Mrs. Slater because she was a winner. The house owner said Mrs. Slater did not live there, but he was curious for knowing what she had won. The visitor said Mrs. Slater had won a free vacuuming and carpet shampoo.

When Mr. Bell came in, he started unpacking a vacuum and cleaning the house. He started with the carpet and then went to the bedroom. After vacuuming the mattress, he showed Mr. Slater the filter with all the dust it contained, but Mr. Slater said that was not his mattress.

Then the mailman came and dropped a letter into the mail box. Mr. Slater kept thinking of getting the letter, so he tried to convince Mr. Bell that the carpet in the other bedroom “is not worth fooling with.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 118) However, Mr. Bell kept Mr. Slater away from getting the letter by dirtying the carpet with the content of an ashtray and sweeping and sweeping.

It was getting dark when Mr. Bell finally finished cleaning the house. When the visitor walked to the door, he picked up the letter and realized it was for Mr. Slater. He said he would look after the letter, since Mr. Slater never revealed his name. Mr. Slater,



on the other hand, just said he would be leaving soon, and he did not need a vacuum to be in the way. He thought he was accepted to the job though his words were not convincing.

“What Do You Do in San Francisco?”

The story was narrated by Henry Robertson, a postman, who described the situation of a young couple and their three children at their arrival to Arcata, a rural, working class town. The newcomers were very different from the rest of families because they were not interested in working. People began talking about the reason a couple like that had left San Francisco. Some said that “the woman was a dope addict [...] and the husband had brought her up here to help her get rid of the habit.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 58)

He related how a letter ended his own and the Marston's marriage. In the story, Henry showed his distrust of and prejudice against Mrs. Marston even though he only sees scraps of their relationship. He blamed the lack of work ethic and Mrs. Marston's reluctance for her husband to get any work as responsible for what happened.

When she disappeared without a trace of her, Henry said to her husband that working would help him forget her. He thought so because working would keep his mind occupied in something else. “It was work, day and night, work that gave me oblivion when I was in your shoes and there was a war on where I was ...” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 62) Henry saw work as a way to forget his troubles and to help forget his own wife and children.



“The Student’s Wife”

The story described a night of insomnia. It was dark outside and a couple was in bed. The wife could not sleep. She said she would like something to eat first, but after she had it, she still could not do it. She kept talking about her dreams she had had and asking questions to her husband. Every time he seemed to be asleep, she woke him up and asked another question. “You’re asleep, Mike. I’d wish you want to talk,” she said. (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 38) She even told him about all the things she liked and disliked, but all Mike wanted was being left alone to sleep. She kept talking and asking him favors all the night long. But later, her husband fell asleep and he did not answer her despite her constant calling his name. She could not sleep no matter what she tried. It started to get light outside and she was still awake.

“Put Yourself in My Shoes”

After an office party, Mr. and Mrs. Myers stopped at the Morgans’ house at Mrs. Myers suggestion. They wanted to say hello and wish a Merry Christmas because the Morgans let the Myerses live in their house while they were away. At first, the couple was received in a friendly way by the Morgans. But after a while, they started arguing for all the things the Myerses did while they were living at the house that the Morgans considered inappropriate. The couple were interrogated and insulted in a strange meeting.

Myers wanted to leave the place, but he was stopped by his wife. Moreover, Morgan knew Myers was a writer, so he told him a story to write about. The story was about a woman who died in the Morgans’ living room while they were in Germany, but



Myers just laughed after hearing it. Morgan became angry and decided to tell another story about Mr. and Mrs. Y and Mr. and Mrs. Z. This story was told in a sarcastic way because it described the situation they were in. Mr. and Mrs. Y had gone to Germany and Mr. and Mrs. Z were left in charge of their house. It was Morgan's way to tell what the Myerses had done in his house Mr. Morgan said there were some things missing and demanded to know what happened to them. "I saw those records just before we left, and now, I'd like this writer to tell me exactly what he knows of their whereabouts." Morgan shouted while the Myerses were leaving, but all they said to each other was, "Those people are crazy." (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 112)

"Jerry and Molly and Sam"

At the beginning of the story, Al was driven crazy by Suzy, the family dog, so he decided to get rid of it. He said to his wife, Betty, he was going to shoot some pool with Carl, his friend. But what he was actually doing was looking for a place to abandon the dog. Then he started to remember how happy he was with his dog, Sam, when he was a child. He wished he could drive to his mother's house and back to those days. After a while, he found a place to abandon Suzy, but he left her there though he knew it was wrong.

He headed back to Sacramento and stopped in a bar where he met a girl called Molly who brought something for the barman, Jerry, to fix. Al thought he had fixed the problem by getting rid of Suzy, but nothing had changed. At home, the kids were worried because Suzy was lost, but Al said she would probably come back soon. It is then that he realized that his decision was not right. Al and Betty argued and she told



him that he did not love her or the children. He thought that everything would be normal once the dog is back home. When Al went to look for Suzy, she is not there but some kids said that one of them took her home. They said he was just up the door. Al finally found Suzy by a fence and she played with him. He realized that there were some dogs that you cannot do anything with.

“Why, Honey?”

The story was written in letter form and it never mentioned a receiver. It was sent by a woman who was concerned about her son because he started doing bad things and lying. For example, Trudy, their cat, was killed with fireworks and appeared dead in the neighbor’s yard, and Mr. Cooper identified one of the killers as the remitter’s son.

The mother discovered that the son was lying when he spent the Saturday working. He said he had earned 80 dollars, but when she was doing his washing, she found only 28 dollars in his pocket. The boy kept lying about many other things and the mother did not understand why he lied. He invented a story about a field trip when he was actually playing hooky.

One day, he was supposed to bring some breakfast item, so she thought he had forgotten them in the car. But what she found was a shirt full of blood. When she asked him about it, he said he had a bloody nose. She discovered his lies when she asked him how he was doing at work. “Fine, he said, he had gotten a raise.” (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 124) But he met Betty who said that they were sorry for his quitting.

One night, she decided to stop this situation. She said “that’s all I’ve ever asked from you, the truth,” but those words only made things worse. (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 125) After their conversation, he took his stuff and left the house. The



mother never saw him again. The boy finally became a famous person and she thought he would easily find her if he wanted. For that reason she moved and changed her name. Despite her changing, the remitter of the letter was able to write to her, so she wanted to know how and why this person decided to send her a letter.

“The Ducks”

A man was in his yard cutting firewood when he saw ducks flying over the house. He continued cutting when his wife came out to tell him that dinner was ready. She also asked him if he was going hunting the next day. She went into the kitchen saying that “I just hate to have you gone all the time. It seems like you’re gone all the time.” (Carver, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?) The man finished his supper and prepared his thing to go hunting the next morning. Then he went to the mill where he worked at night, but he came back early because his boss, Jack Granger, had died from a heart attack. They had something to eat and prepared to go to bed. She said she was going to but she would have a bath first. The man looked out the window into the darkness and saw his wife’s reflection on the window. He started to see his wife differently. He went to bed and read a book of poetry. When he looked at the biography section of the book, he began to think of his own life. After the bath, his wife kissed him in bed, but he thought if he really loved her or not. He also thought of their trip to Reno believing that it would change things. His wife fell asleep but he was awake looking out the window but it was dark and raining. He tried to wake her up because he thought he could hear something outside, but there was nothing except darkness and rain.



“How About This?”

Harry and Emily were driving through the countryside of north-western Washington. They thought of moving there to start a new life in the country. Emily had lived there, so they arrived to Emily’s old house. Harry checked the walls to see how solid they were and started to go room by room and he found that there was not a fireplace, a toilet or electricity. He also found the mattress in the kitchen. He said that everything the house needed was a little work. The house was seen as a metaphor of their relationship, and it also needed to be improved.

After that, they went outside and Harry could see himself collecting the red apples, but Emily recalled memories of her and her father together. She remembered a day when his father shot a deer. She told that story to Harry and then she started to cry. This event showed that Emily did not really want to come back to the country, but Harry seemed to be decided. However, Emily’s reaction and the house made him change his mind. He thought that his life in the city was not so bad. Harry came back to the house and tried to light a cigarette, but he trembled. Emily told him “We’ll just have to love each other.” (Carver, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?) Then he realized that his relationship was more important than the place where they decided to live.

“Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes”

The story began with a conversation between Evan Hamilton and his wife. They were talking about the big step that Hamilton was giving in having left the cigarettes. Ann was very proud for that happening, though Hamilton said he could still smell the cigarettes on his body. At dinner, Hamilton went outside to call his son, Roger, but he



found another boy on his bicycle. This boy told him that Mrs. Miller wanted to talk with one of the Roger's parents. Mr. Hamilton went to the house of the Mrs. Miller to know what was happening.

On his way to Mrs. Miller house, Mr. Hamilton walked on streets that were new for him. When he arrived at the Millers' house, Roger was with two more boys, Kip and Gary. After introducing himself, Mrs. Miller told him that Gilbert's bike was lost and Roger, Kip, and Gary had it. When asked, the boys said that the bicycle was returned to the house and they did not know where it was now. After that, Gary's father, Mr. Berman, arrived and said he wanted to talk to Gary in the kitchen. There, Mr. Berman and Gary agreed with the idea of blaming Roger and Kip. "It was Roger's idea to roll it," Gary said, but Roger said it was Gary's idea, not his. Mr. Berman told Roger to shut up. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 27) This caused Hamilton to become angry and said he would pay just a third part of the cost of the bicycle.

While going out the house, Mr. Berman grazed Hamilton's shoulder and Hamilton stepped off the porch into some bushes. Furious, Hamilton stroked Mr. Berman and both fell to the lawn. Mrs. Miller pleaded them to stop, so Hamilton let Berman go. Hamilton was sweating and then he went home with Roger and Kip. He apologized for acting like that in front of his son, but Roger said "let me feel your muscles." (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 30) But his father just told him to go in and have dinner.

Hamilton sat on the porch and remembered that he saw his own father fighting with a farmhand. After a while, Hamilton went to his son's bed. There he advised Roger not to damage any other personal property. They talked about Roger's grandfather and then he smelled his father's fingers. The smell was gone. Hamilton thought it was



scared out of him. The story ends with Roger watching his father walking to the door. He said to let the door open, but Hamilton closed the door halfway. He knew his son was growing and soon he would sleep with the door closed.

“What Is It?”¹⁹

Leo and his wife Toni met when they used to sell children encyclopedias door to door. After a time they married, and they had to go to the court on Monday, and their lawyer advised them to sell their convertible before the bank takes it. So, Toni took her time dressing up to go and sell that car, and she asked her husband how she looked. “You look great. I’d buy a car from you anytime,” Leo answered. (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 129)

While Toni was driving to sell the car, she found her neighbor Ernest Williams. He told her that Leo had taken another woman to the house while she was out. Four hours later, Toni called Leo to tell her that she had sold the car but that she was going to have dinner with the salesman. Later, Toni called her husband again, and he asked how much she had gotten. “Six and a quarter,” she said. She also told Leo that this man gave her his opinion of bankruptcy. He preferred to be called a robber or a rapist than a bankrupt. This fact only symbolized the materialism existing in America where money is more important than morals.

Near dawn, Toni arrived drunk to the house. Leo undressed her and she called him “Bankrupt.” He took her underpants off her to see if she had slept with the man. Then he opened her purse and found the check, but he was distracted by a car coming

¹⁹ In Carver’s compilation, “Where I’m Calling From,” the story appears named as “Are These Actual Miles.”



into the drive. A tall man came out the car and laid something on the porch. Leo opened the door and found Toni's make up. This was the salesman who was returning it. "Wait!" Leo screamed then Ernest's light went on, so he looked out from the window. Leo wanted to say something, but all he told him is "Monday." He referred to the day he had to go to the court and thought a new life would start then.

Leo returned to bed and lay beside Toni who was still asleep. He saw in her body the stretch mark and remembered waking up the morning after they bought the car and saw it in the drive. It was like material objects were the most important things for him.

"Signals"

A couple, Wayne and Caroline, went to Aldo's restaurant to celebrate Caroline's birthday. After ordering, Wayne said to his partner that Aldo could have given them a better table. He thought he was more important than he really was and deserved a better table. Then Wayne and Caroline argued about the drink they should have asked for. Wayne ordered a small domestic bottle of champagne, but Caroline said they should have ordered a bottle of Lancer's. After that, Paul, the waiter, came with the soup, but there is not a soup spoon on the table. Wayne asked for a soup spoon but Paul was unable to understand. Aldo apologized for Paul did not understand English very well. The couple argued again when Wayne said "Well, what do you think? Is there a chance for us or not?" (Carver, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?) She said she gave him the best years of her life, but he answered that he did not care what she would do. She realized that all Wayne cared about was he. When they finished the dinner, Wayne became jealous for he saw Aldo kissing Caroline's wrist and giving her a rose. In the



end, the problems in the relationship were not solved. He wanted to stay with Caroline, but he was making no effort to accomplish that.

“Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”

Ralph Wyman tried to figure out what to do with his life. But after attending Philosophy and Literature classes, he knew that he wanted to become a teacher. There, he met Marian who he married after college. They had two children, Dorothea and Robert, but Ralph believed that his wife had sex with another man. When he faced her, she admitted that she did so four years ago. Furious, he went from bar to bar. In the first bar, the barman recognized him and he bought a drink, so he decided to go to another bar where nobody knew him. In the bathroom, he started questioning who he was and what he believed in while looking in the mirror. He remembered his father's words that life was a serious matter, and he realized that was true.

In that bar, he decided to join a poker game, and he was lucky at the beginning, but in the end he had only two dollars left in his wallet. This situation was similar to his relationship with Marin, since at first, he felt lucky to have a beautiful woman, but then he knew that things would never be the same, because she had cheated on him. Ralph decided to buy some cigarettes in a liquor store, but then a man stole his wallet.

After that he went home and found his wife and children asleep. He faced a situation of loss of identity and started asking question about who he was and what he should do. His children heard him and run to greet him, but when he heard Marian waking up, he locked himself in the bathroom. Marian told him to open the door, but he just told her to go away. In the bathroom, he looked again in the mirror and started



making faces as he was uncomfortable with whom he was. Then he took a shower and got into bed. Marian sat on the bed and touched him. Finally, she moved towards him and he turned to meet her. In the end, he realized that he could not refuse his wife.

That is what all the stories in this first collection are all about. After reading and analyzing them, the situations that they described seemed familiar to us for we have been talking about Raymond's life and career which were not glamorous at all. As a result, the stories are just reflecting his real feelings in that stage of his life. When Carver's life changed, his stories changed, too; nevertheless, in that first stage of his career we talked about above, every aspect of his life was really problematic because of his drinking and other problems. Thus, as could be seen, the first stories he wrote were hopeless and the characters lived in a world of despair.

In order to understand Carver's reasons to write about these topics, it was important to investigate his life and career, first, because knowing what his life was like would make it easier to get the real idea he tried to communicate through his writing. For example, the main characters of the stories are not important people, but common people living common lives and trying, but sometimes failing, to do what they want to. Also, Carver's favorite activities, hunting and fishing, were present in many of the stories. Drinking, a fact that marked his life forever, was also a common habit in many of his characters. Moreover, smoking and even consuming drugs were other bad habits some characters had, so Carver and his characters shared these qualities in his early years as writer. Besides, loss, death, bankruptcy, betrayal, fights, fear, regret, identity, and lots of other problems are faced by these people who get involved in every situation. Situations Carver himself went through in his lifetime.



His fiction was developed by his own mind, but the places and situations it talked about were taken from real life. Once in a while, the name of cities and towns were mentioned in the stories. Those places were also familiar to us, and Carver mentioned them because he lived in many of those cities and was acquainted enough to describe lots of their characteristics and how life was over there. So this important fact that we have noticed in the stories we just reviewed gives the stories a realistic setting. For example, in the stories cities like Sacramento, Yakima, and San Francisco appear, of course, there are lots of other among the ones we mentioned. That was the way he let us know what life in those cities were like and what people living there had to go through. Though the stories are similar to the lives of thousands of people of America, none of them is really represented in the plot of the stories. Therefore, he used a lot of imagination in every story, and it was easy to understand why his work has caught the attention of many people.

This first collection is not the only one that talks about these kind of themes. Some of the stories written after the publication of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” were similar in style and topics to the stories in this collection. We will see that his second major collection shared many characteristics with the first one, and it was because the stories were written on his last days as practicing alcoholic and his first days of his “second life.” Carver was just getting out a hopeless world, but his characters were still submerged in this world of despair we have talked about. by that time, nobody thought he or she would be reading a story about the working classes, but from then on, that was what his audience wanted from them for his work became more popular after this first collection appeared.



2.3.1.2 What We Talk about when We Talk about Love (1981)

“What We Talk about when We Talk about Love” is Carver’s second major collection of short stories published in 1981. The collection had 17 stories chosen and written by Carver and edited by Gordon Lish who were good friends at that time. This collection is considered in his early work because many of the stories included in it were written during Carver’s “furious years” and his first years of sobriety, so, somehow, they were similar in some aspects to the previous stories. (Sklenicka) Considering that his new life began in 1977, only four years before the publication of this collection, Carver was just beginning to heal his body and soul from what had been days of loss and despair, and it was deeply reflected in his work.

This second collection of short stories shared a lot of characteristics with the previous published book, “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” First of all, some of the stories still have some traces of the so-called “minimalistic” style. Carver and “minimalism” seem to be attached forever. When his name is mentioned, people immediately associate him with this term, and by many people, he is considered the “father of the new wave,” though he always answered that he was “only the father of my own children.” (Stull) When his first stories started to be published, American literature gained incredible masterpieces and a new writing style. In this way, he “is master of a genre, the short story, and of a style: that maximally pared-down writing that critics have labeled ‘minimalism.’” Although Carver had said that this was not a good term to describe his new stories, some critics still saw this in some of his stories. Later, Carver decided to rewrite some of his most acclaimed stories implementing a more expansive style in his writing. He always knew that short stories demanded a story to be written in



few words. They had to be *short*, but others thought Carver was limiting his capacities. Yet, it is clear for us that his stories need a lot of imagination to be understood. Ray proposed a situation, and the reader personalized it with a lot of imagination.

Moreover, the themes discussed in a great number of stories still refer to problematic lives lived by common people. This characteristic could also be noted in a great number of the stories included in Carver's first collection, and persisting in the second one. The explanation for Carver's writing hopeless tales was his drinking. In Zouch Magazine, what the critic said was:

In his early years, Carver's work was dark, depressing, even murderous at times. Babies are killed by squabbling parents, men murder their wives and sisters, alcoholism runs rampant, and infidelity offers more intimacy than the brutality of the marriages described here. Carver was a practicing alcoholic in the late 1960s and 1970s, and the tales he wrote during this time reflect the hopelessness and despair which drove him to drink. (Tomlinson)

Later, in the review of the stories in "What We Talk about," we will see that the themes Tomlinson has referred to are actually the basis of the stories in this collection. For example, "Little Thing" included in "What We Talk about when We Talk about Love" is the one telling about a baby being killed by his parents, though it was not intentionally. However, "Tell the Women We're Going" describes how a psychopath killed two innocent girls with a rock. The themes became even more problematic, in some cases. Infidelity can be found in "Gazebo" and other stories, and alcoholism is present in almost every story we found in the book. Additionally, it is easy to find



disbelief, broken relationships, isolation, regret, and terror throughout the pages of the book.

Furthermore, the characters consisted of common people belonging to the lower classes; essentially, they were the protagonists of all the stories he wrote. They “worked in diners and motels; they had amputated limbs and their families had left them, with or without furniture; their working lives, their cropped, half-understood thoughts had not been seen in fiction.” (The Observer Magazine 22) In addition to the maids, waitresses, teachers, and other people Carver was familiar with and decided to talk about. They lived extraordinary lives and new problematic situations, sometimes hopeless just like the characters in already existing stories. Like the characters in the majority of his stories, the ones in the second collection “still struggle with death and guilt and divorce and depression. They wonder where things might have gone wrong. But many of Carver’s initial drafts also describe people attempting to rebuild their lives, seeking some sort of meaning in a savage universe.” (Tomlinson) In short, that savage universe in which people lived was the principal similarity between Carver’s first collections.

Besides, though the themes and characters are considered of relevant importance in Carver’s second major collection, there is another subject that has attracted the attention of many people who started a debate about who was responsible for such great stories in the collection, Carver or his editor, Gordon Lish. Some say that Carver’s versions are good, but Lish’s are real masterpieces.

Since these two big characters of American Literature met in Palo Alto, they established a strong working relationship that made Carver trust Lish no matter what, and many of his most renowned stories were put in Lish’s hands. Lish started to publish



these stories in Esquire Magazine, and when he became an editor at Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Carver's stories were taken there to be published as a new collection by this publishing house.

All the stories included in the collection, originally called "Beginners," were sent to Lish in New York City to start the editing work. It was May of 1980 and many of the stories had already been published individually in magazines and other media. With the manuscript containing the stories, Carver intended to create a new collection, but Lish had other plans. He "read the manuscript, reached out to Carver, and asked if he could tighten the collection as a whole." That sounded like a good idea for Carver. He replied "not to worry about taking a pencil to the stories if you can make them better." (Tomlinson) They had already worked together on previous stories, so it was understandable Carver's confidence in getting a better manuscript.

However, when Carver finally received the work, many things were different. He did not read the manuscript immediately, so Lish continued editing the work for its publication. Lish's work had been exhaustive and extreme. He had "removed entire pages of text, saving a word here, a phrase there." Carver could not believe that one of the stories "was cut by a whopping 78%." For example, Lish "changed the names of characters. He wrote new lines. He changed titles, tone, effect, endings." In sum, "he changed everything." (Tomlinson)

In order to know how influential was Lish's editing in Carver's work, and how much a story changed after he had taken "a pencil to the stories," let's consider a fragment of the tale that named the collection, "What We Talk about when We Talk about Love." This comparison appeared in The New Yorker.



In this correction cited below, we will notice that the words and sentences that Lish added are written in bold (**B**). Moreover, the words and sentences he deleted are crossed out (~~abe~~). And finally, there are also signs that indicated the beginning of a new paragraph (¶).

My friend ~~Mel Herb~~ McGinnis, ~~a cardiologist,~~ was talking. **Mel McGinnis is a cardiologist, and sometimes that gives him the right.** ¶ The four of us were sitting around his kitchen table drinking gin. ~~It was Saturday afternoon.~~ Sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink. There were ~~Mel Herb~~ and ~~me~~ † and his second wife, Teresa—Terri, we called her—and my wife, Laura. We lived in Albuquerque, ~~then.~~ **But** ~~but~~ we were all from somewhere else. ¶ There was an ice bucket on the table. The gin and the tonic water kept going around, and we somehow got on the subject of love. ~~Mel Herb~~ thought real love was nothing less than spiritual love. **He said** ~~When he was young~~ he'd spent five years in a seminary before quitting to go to medical school. ~~He~~ ~~He'd left the Church at the same time,~~ ~~but he~~ said he still looked back **on** ~~to~~ those years in the seminary as the most important in his life.

Terri said the man she lived with before she lived with ~~Mel Herb~~ loved her so much he tried to kill her. ~~Herb laughed after she said this. He made a face. Terri looked at him.~~ Then **Terri** she said, "He beat me up one night, ~~the last night we lived together.~~ He dragged me around the living room by my ankles. **He kept saying,** ~~all the while saying,~~ 'I love you, ~~don't you see?~~ I love you, you bitch.' He went on dragging me around the living room. **My** ~~my~~ head **kept** knocking on



things.” ~~Terri She~~ looked around the table at us and then looked at her hands on her glass. “What do you do with love like that?” she said. ¶ She was a bone-thin woman with a pretty face, dark eyes, and brown hair that hung down her back. She liked necklaces made of turquoise, and long pendant earrings. ~~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.~~ (The New Yorker)

That was what Lish had done with the first two paragraphs. It can be noticed that there were just some sentences deleted and others rearranged. However, he had already changed aspects that made the story look so different from what it used to be. For instance, some names were changed by Lish, thus, “Mel” was originally called “Herb,” in Carver’s version. Furthermore, the name “Ed” was another of Lish’s ideas, and it can be noticed in the following paragraph:

“I just wouldn’t call **Ed** Carl’s behavior love. ~~That’s, that’s~~ all I’m saying, honey,” **Mel** ~~Herb~~ said. “What about you guys?” **Mel** ~~he~~ said to Laura and me. “Does that sound like love to you?” (The New Yorker)

Apparently, for Lish, “Carl” was not a good name to be given to Terri’s first boyfriend. For him, “Ed” was a name more appropriate for an extreme lover like him. However, despite these great changes, Lish’s work was just beginning.

In the next pages of the review, we could see complete paragraphs being omitted. Paragraphs disappeared one after another; fifteen big paragraphs, more or



less, in the whole story. His first big omission was at the part where Herb, or Mel, told his story about an old couple who were hit by another car while driving. In his edition, Lish ended Mel's story telling that "the man's heart was breaking because he could not turn his goddam head and see his goddam wife." (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 183) In Carver's version, Herb had sat down in a chair next to the old man's bed to hear his story about the old couple's home life and love. This part consisted of eight paragraphs, but they were deleted. In those paragraphs, moreover, the man and the woman had different rooms, but Lish put them together in the same room at the hospital. That explains why the old man had tried to turn his head to see his wife. That was another of Lish's ideas.

The ending of the story was also radically changed. Mel had just decided not to call his children and the rest wanted something to eat when Lish thought the story would end there. This was the part he changed the most in the story, deciding to add only a few lines after that event. As a result, when Lish finished his editing job, the story had a new ending. And in the same way we did before, the following paragraphs show what Lish had added, omitted, and changed, in this case, at the end of the story:

"Sounds fine to me," I said. "Eat or not eat. Or keep drinking. I could head right on **out** into the sunset."

"What does that mean, honey?" Laura said, ~~turning a look on me.~~



~~“It just means what I said,” I said honey, nothing else. “It means I could just keep going and going. That’s all it means meant.” It’s that sunset maybe.” The window had a reddish tint to it now as the sun went down.~~

~~“I could eat something myself,” Laura said. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so hungry in my life. Is there something to nibble on I just realized I’m hungry. What is there to snack on?”~~

~~“I’ll put out some cheese and crackers,” Terri said, but she just sat there. ¶ But Terri just sat there. She did not get up to get anything.~~

~~Mel turned his glass over. He spilled it out on the table.~~

~~“Gin’s gone,” Mel said.~~

~~Terri said, “Now what?”~~

~~I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone’s heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark. (The New Yorker)~~

Consequently, the ending of the story we read was actually Lish’s creation. The original draft Carver sent to him had about eight paragraphs more after this event. All of



them were deleted, and with them, many other events that happened to the characters disappeared.

In the missing paragraphs, there was a passage when Terri let Nick and Laura know her concern for Mel's depression and thoughts of killing himself. "Lately he's been talking about suicide again. Especially when he's been drinking. Sometimes I think he's too vulnerable," Terri said, in some missing lines, to her friends. (The New Yorker) Of course, the readers of "What We Talk about" never knew that by the time the story was published. When Carver's manuscripts of the stories were published by Tess Gallagher with the original name, "Beginners," the readers discovered what were Carver's true intentions to end this story. Thus, everyone knew that the ending Carver intended to get was changed, too. This is what Carver actually wrote for an end:

The shower stopped running. In a minute, I heard whistling as Herb opened the bathroom door. I kept looking at the women at the table. Terri was still crying and Laura was stroking her hair. I turned back to the window. The blue layer of sky had given way now and was turning dark like the rest. But stars had appeared. I recognized Venus and farther off and to the side, not as bright but unmistakably there on the horizon, Mars. The wind had picked up. I looked at what it was doing to the empty fields. I thought unreasonably that it was too bad the McGinnises no longer kept horses. I wanted to imagine horses rushing through those fields in the near dark, or even just standing quietly with their heads in opposite directions near the fence. I stood at the window and waited. I knew I had to keep still a while longer, keep my eyes out there, outside the house as long as there was something left to see. (The New Yorker)



In the same way, all the stories included in the collection suffered extreme changes. One after another, they were rearranged and improved by Carver's editor. The manuscript was about to be published despite the great difference after its edition.

Carver did not immediately read Lish's versions of the stories, but when he did, he was stunned. "He wrote Lish a frantic, heartfelt letter asking to be released from his book contract." (Tomlinson) In the letter, Carver also let him know what he thought of that entire situation. Eventually, the letter became widely known and was published on the media. They noticed Carver's concern for his stories which were no longer the same. "The trouble was, Lish's version was so far from what Carver had sent him that Carver felt it was unrecognizable." (The Observer Magazine 22) What Carver wrote to his friend was this:

Dear Gordon,

I've got to pull out of this one. Please hear me. I've been up all night thinking on this, and nothing but this, so help me. I've looked at it from every side, I've compared both versions of the edited mss – the first one is better, I truly believe ... maybe if I were alone, by myself, and no one had ever seen these stories, maybe then, knowing that your versions are better than some of the ones I sent, maybe I could get into this and go with it. But Tess has seen all of these and gone over them closely. Donald Hall had seen many of the new ones ... and Richard Ford, Toby Wolff ... how can I explain to these fellows when I see them, as I will see them, what happened to the story in the meantime, after its book publication? ... But if I go ahead with this as it is, it will not be good for me. The



book will not be, as it should, a cause for joyous celebration, but one of defense and explanation. All this is complicated, and maybe not so complicatedly, tied up with my feelings of worth and self-esteem since I quit drinking. I just can't do it, I can't take the risk as to what might happen to me ... You have made so many of these stories better, my God, with the lighter editing and trimming ... Even though they may be closer to works of art than the original and people be reading them 50 years from now, they're still apt to cause my demise, I'm serious, they're so intimately hooked up with my getting well, recovering, gaining back some little self-esteem and feeling of worth as a writer and a human being. (Tomlinson)

This letter was considered a real masterpiece for the way Carver used to express what he thought about Lish's editing work. However, his words did not do anything but emphasize Lish greatness at proofreading. The book was finally published in spite of Lish's extreme alterations, and the collection received critical acclaim. It is easy to understand Carver's concern because this collection meant more than another collection for him. "This new collection, which he titled *Beginners*, was the first he had written since he thought he'd never write again – the first since he'd been sober, the first since he'd left his wife, the first since he'd met Tess Gallagher, already a well-known poet at the time and the woman with whom he was to spend the rest of his days." (The Observer Magazine 22) Let's remember that when Carver got hospitalized, the doctor said he would have died if he did not stop drinking; therefore, this was the reborn of his career and a big step to becoming the greatest and most influential writer since Hemingway. That is why he had a hard time trying to decide what to do.



When the book appeared, everything changed for Raymond. He was famous, even more famous than he was when the previous collection appeared. “The book’s publication went ahead, in Lish’s form and under Lish’s title – What We Talk about when We Talk about Love. It was received, in April 1981, to spectacular acclaim. It made Carver’s name and remains his most famous book.” (The Observer Magazine 22) Moreover, many of the stories were award-winning stories, and others were considered the best short stories of all time. The phoenix had taken off the ground again, and this time Carver was not like another of his characters. This time, his past life was only present in his mind and expressed in his stories.

Once again, this is time to review the plot of the 17 stories included in the book. The stories will be reviewed the way they were published by Gordon Lish; as “What We Talk about when We Talk about Love” and not as “Beginners.”

2.3.1.2.1 Storyline Synopses

“Why Don’t You Dance?”

The story was narrated by an unmanned man who told us an unusual experience about an old man. This man had taken all his things into the front yard. His bed, TV, desk, a sofa a chair and a coffee table, everything was outside the house. Only some cartons remained in the living room. People passing by slowed their car to see, but no one stopped.

A boy and a girl that were furnishing a little apartment thought it was a yard sale. So he pulled into the driveway to take a look. They became interested in buying the bed and the TV, and she said to offer ten dollars less than the price he would hear. The girl



was lying on the bed when the man came down the sidewalk with sandwiches, beer, and whiskey. As expected, the bed and the TV were bought for ten dollars less than the price the man offered.

The man decided to share the whiskey with the young couple, so they all drank at the table in the yard. Then the man decided to put on a record, and they continued drinking whiskey while listening. "Why don't you kids dance?" the man said, so the young couple danced up and down the driveway while people watched. (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 160) Then the man told the girl to dance with him, and so she did.

Weeks later, the girl began to tell how they had lived there to all the people. "...she was trying to get it talked out," but later, she stopped trying. (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 161)

"Viewfinder"

The story was written in the first person, so the narrator told his story when a man with no hands came to his house to sell him a photograph. The narrator invited him to come in and the photographer asked for the toilet.

While the narrator was watching a photograph the visitor had taken of his house, he saw his head in the picture. The photographer came out and had a cup of coffee, and the house owner said kids knocked on his door offering to paint his address in the curb. He thought the photographer could know something, but when he asked him about the kids, he answered he knew nothing.



The photographer said he lived downtown and came to the neighborhood to take pictures and try to sell them. He also said that he once had kids and that they were the cause of his losing his hands though he never explained how.

Then the photographer left the house, but the narrator asked him for more pictures. They agreed to the price of the pictures, three photographs for one dollar, and the photographer took more pictures of the man and his house, but the new photographs were not different from the first ones.

The narrator decided to climb up to the roof and asked the other man for more shots. While he was up there, he picked some rocks up on the roof and threw them away. The photographer said that he had to stand still for the pictures to be taken, but he continued throwing rock. It was like the narrator felt stuck in the pictures, but then he was no longer trapped in the viewfinder of the photographer.

“Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit”

This story was narrated by a man, who had hard times seeing his mother kissing another man in front of him. His father was dead, and his mother had decided to bring another man into their lives. After that, the narrator described a similar situation in his own marriage. Myrna, his wife, had fallen in love with a man called Ross while she was attending Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. Melody, the narrator’s daughter disliked Ross, too. Myrna had been helping Ross with his economic situation and Melody thought her mother’s money had to be spent on her.

Something interesting happened next. Myrna said that Ross collected antique cars, but when the narrator saw the cars, they looked like scraps to him. In the same



way, Ross was everything to Myrna, but to the storyteller, he was a failure and no better than him. Moreover, the TV in the narrator's house had no pictures, but it was possible to understand it by the sounds. It gave the idea that pictures were not always necessary to understand something.

In the story, there were problems in relationships. First, we had the narrator's mother with another man, and then his own wife, Myrna, and Ross. It emphasized that relationships were always difficult. His father had died of a heart attack, and he never said good night to his wife. There was incomplete communication in the narrator's family.

At the end of the story, Myrna and her husband, the narrator, were in the house preparing for dinner. He asked her a hug, but she refused to do it until he had washed his hands. Myrna wanted things to change though it was never said if there was a real change or not in the relationship.

"Gazebo"

The story was narrated by Duane, who described the situation he was living when his wife, Holly, caught him with the maid, Juanita, having sex. Therefore, themes of betrayal and despair were found in the tale.

The story started with Holly desperately trying to kill herself by jumping out the window. They were the managers of a motel, so they locked the office and went to an upstairs suite to talk. She was an attractive woman, but she said her heart had been broken by what Duane had done.



Things were great managing the motel during the first year. But one day, a Mexican girl came in to clean while Duane was in the bathroom. While she was cleaning, he came out of the bathroom and saw her. At first, she was surprised, but then they smiled and got down on the bed.

Duane tried to comfort Holly, though it was useless. Both of them knew he was thinking of Juanita and could not get her off his mind. Holly told him she was going to Nevada or killing herself. People on the street tried to make some noise, to call their attention to rent a room, but they did not care. She just demanded of him to fill her glass again.

They have been used to drink in every opportunity. Every decision they made needed a drink to be taken. While talking they had been drinking, too, and he knew things were not going to be the same with Holly.

Juanita and he used to be together five days a week, and after Holly knew what they had been doing, things started going downhill. He stopped cleaning the pool and fixing the faucets, meanwhile she was not registering the guests right. They just did not care about anything anymore.

Holly never thought something like that could happen to her and longed for things to be like before. She reminded him of the days when they were young, and the plans they had. She recalled the day when they drove outside of Yakima and came to an old house where they asked for a drink of water and people showed them around. There was a gazebo where men used to come and play music while others listened. She thought they were going to be like that when they would get old, but that was no longer



possible. Duane tried to tell her that this was not that bad, but for her those dreams had been broken. He could not fix it though he really wanted to.

“I Could See the Smallest Things”

This story was about Nancy who was sleeping in his bedroom when she was woken up by a sound early in the morning. It was like someone was opening the gate, and she was afraid of checking.

Her husband, Cliff, was passed out and his unconsciousness was attributed to his drinking problem. Nancy had nobody to help her and decided to check it herself. After drinking a cup of tea, she stepped out the door. It was clear because of the moon light, so she could see everything, but she could not notice her neighbor, Sam, leaning behind the fence. Actually, there were two fences, one set up by Sam and another by Cliff.

Sam stood up and said hello to Nancy. He was using repellent to kill slugs that were eating their way to the rosebushes. Sam's first wife, Millie, had died and he married again, and the roses were important for Sam because they had been planted by Millie.

Sam and Cliff used to be good friends, but then they stopped talking to each other and erected two fences that showed the distance between them.

Sam and Nancy were talking and he told her he wished Cliff and he were still friends. They used to drink together, but Sam had stopped drinking since they stopped speaking to each other. Obviously, Cliff continued drinking since he was unconscious in



the bedroom. Sam felt alone because of the loss of his wife and his friendship with Cliff. He also longed for things to be like they were before.

Nancy said good bye to Sam and returned to the room where Cliff was still unconscious. As she lay in bed, she remembered that she never closed the gate. She tried to sleep, but she thought of the world outside, instead. Some things would never change, Cliff's drinking, for example, and the others remained incomplete.

“Sacks”

The story took place in an airport in Sacramento, where Les, a book salesman, would have a meeting with his father.

Les and his father had not seen each other in two years, after his father and mother got divorced. Les told his father that everything was okay though he did not feel well. He was still angry for his parents' divorce. The divorce had been caused by Sally Wain, another woman Les' father met.

Les' father told his son how he met this new woman. She had come to his house to sell Stanley Products, and he let her come in the house. He ended kissing Sally and later they slept together. Les' father had never cheated on his wife until Sally appeared in his life, but this led the marriage to come to an end. While his father told him his story, Les did not feel any connection or closeness to his father. It was like Les had lost his admiration for him.

When Les asked him about Sally's husband, he said that one day he came home early and found them together. Les' father heard Larry, Sally's husband, pleading her to



stay with him, so it was both the end of his relationship with Sally and his marriage with Les' mother.

The story ended with Les coming back home when he remembered he had forgotten a bag of Almond Roca and jellybeans that his father had given to him. One year later, Les realized that his wife, Mary, did not need his sweets. He also noticed that he had not seen his father since then.

“The Bath”²⁰

This is an early version of one of Carver's great stories, “A Small Good Thing.” The story was narrated in the third person and past tense. Moreover, there were feelings of fear, loss, and uncertainty present in the story.

The story began with Ann Weiss at the bakery ordering a cake for his son's birthday. Scotty was his name and he would be eight years old next Monday. She chose her son's favorite flavor, chocolate, and it would be a spaceship cake. After that, she gave her name and phone number to him and the baker promised the cake would be ready for the party on Monday.

On Monday morning, Scotty and another boy were walking to school when the birthday boy was knocked down by a car. Scotty did not cry, but he just got up and decided to go back home. The other boy was curious about what it felt like to be hit by a car, but Scotty did not answer.

²⁰ Carver's version of the story was originally called “A Small Good Thing,” but after Lish's edition, it was retitled “The Bath.” Obviously, when Carver rewrote the story, he gave it its original name; thus, the story was what Carver always intended.



At home he told his mother what had happened to him, and then he lay down on his back. The party was cancelled and the boy was taken to the hospital. His father left his office and hurried to the hospital, and they waited for Scotty to wake up.

When the father went home to take a bath, he heard the phone ringing. It was the baker demanding the sixteen dollars for the cake that was never picked up, but he did not know anything about it. After a while the phone rang again, but the baker just said "It's ready." (Carver, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love 50)

When he got back to the hospital, Scotty was still in a coma, and he said his wife to go home. A nurse came in and took Scotty's pulse. She said their son was stable. Later, a doctor came in and said they would know what he had when the tests came in and also tried to persuade the parents that their son was just sleeping. The couple waited and watched their son, but the boy still did not wake up.

Continually, doctors came in and noticed no change in the boy. Then a technician came to take some blood from the kid. The mother did not understand why he was doing that, and the technician just said "doctor's orders." (Carver, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love 53)

The father said that someone should go home to feed the dog, and Ann said she would go. She thought that the boy would wake up if she was not watching. "I'll go home and take a bath and put something on clean," she also said. (Carver, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love 55)

As she was leaving the hospital, she saw a family waiting for news of their son Nelson. She asked Nelson's parents where the elevator was and also told them about Scotty.



When she got home, she fed the dog and then heard the phone ring. The story ended with the woman answering the phone. She asked the person on the end of the line “Is it about Scotty?” and the man answered “it had to do with Scotty, yes,” but it was never revealed if this was the baker or someone from the hospital. (Carver, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love 56) There was a feeling of uncertainty both in the reader and Scotty’s mother.

“Tell the Women We’re Going”

In this story, Carver reached limits he had never reached before because it described how a nice guy changed so much, to becoming a psychopath.

Bill and Jerry were close friends since they were young children. They used to share everything and go to college together. Jerry started changing on the day he dropped out of college. He married Carol and started working in Robby’s Mart.

After many years, Bill and Jerry were still friends. Bill finished college and met Linda, who became his wife. Linda and he used to go to Jerry’s apartment to drink and listen to records, but Bill knew that his friend was not the same. Jerry was only twenty two and had two children and another on the way.

One day, Bill and Linda were at Jerry’s apartment when he asked Bill to go for a drive. They arrived to Rec Center Riley and played pool and drank beer. The bar tender tried to start a conversation, but Jerry did not answer. He was thinking, though it was not known of what.

They left the place and started on their way home when they passed two girls cycling on the road. Jerry thought they should go back to talk to the girls though Bill was



not so sure. They agreed to talk to the girls and waited for them. Bill introduced himself and Jerry, but the girls, Sharon and Barbara, seemed not to be interested. Jerry's idea was having sex with Sharon and Bill could have Barbara.

They continued driving and parked the car waiting for the girls to arrive. When the girls came, they walked through a path out of the road while Bill and Jerry were following them. Suddenly Jerry told Bill to cut them off. Bill did not care about having sex or not with Barbara, but Jerry was very interested.

At the end of the story, Jerry caught up with the girls but instead of talking to them, he hit Sharon over the head with a rock. Sharon died and then Jerry used the same rock to kill Barbara. Jerry had become a psychopath from being a nice guy. He had killed two innocent girls and Bill "never knew what Jerry wanted." (Carver, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love)

"After the Denim"

Edith packer was listening to music in the living room while her husband James was doing tax returns for some of his clients. He was a retired accountant and liked silence when he was working. Therefore, she kept the volume of the TV low and listened to the tape cassette in her ear.

One night, they went to the Community Centre because that was bingo night, though he said he did not feel lucky. They were a close couple, so he took her arm and entered into the centre. They went to their usual table, but they saw a young couple sitting there; therefore, they had to go to another table. The young man was dressed in denim looking as a foil to James. Judith was smoking a cigarette and James asked her



when she was going to stop smoking. She answered that she would stop smoking when he stopped drinking.

They started playing bingo when James noticed that the young man who was sitting at his favorite table was cheating. He realized that this young man was playing with cards he had not paid for. Edith went to the bathroom, so James came to him to tell him that he knew he was cheating, and the young man did nothing but just denied it.

He returned to his table when Edith came back worried. She told him that she was “spotting.” (Carver, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love) She was not well, and despite this fact, they continued playing. James kept watching at the young couple when suddenly the woman who was with the man in denim said “bingo!” James was not happy and said she would probably buy drugs with the money. Despite his anger, James worried about his wife.

At home, she told him that she had to go to the doctor. Edith went to bed and James to the guest room. He wondered why the young couple at the bingo could not be sick instead of his wife.

“So Much Water So Close to Home”

This story was narrated by Claire whose husband was involved in a strange situation. So this was in the first person and the present tense.

At the beginning of the story, Stuart realized that Claire, his wife, was staring at him. She was in disbelief at Stuart who found a dead body while he was fishing with his friends, but they did not notify the authorities until they were leaving the place, three days later. She tried to discuss the situation with him, “Don’t you see? She needed



help,” she said not knowing why he waited that long to contact the police, but Stuart became angry and went to the patio. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 214)

The news of the girl's death had been published in the newspaper and Stuart's and the other men's names were on the first pages as the ones who found the body. She pushed all the dishes and glasses onto the floor, trying to call his attention, but he just remained in silence in the yard. Probably Claire thought his husband and his friends could have killed the girl.

They had gone fishing to the Naches River. There, Mel Dorn, one of the men, found the dead girl floating face down in the river and called his friends to see. After discussing it, they decide to continue with their fishing, but one of them tied the body to a tree root to prevent her floating away. When they were leaving, Stuart called the police, and they all gave their names because they had nothing to hide.

That night, Stuart arrived home as if nothing had happened. The next morning, the phone rang, but he did not answer. After that, he decided to tell everything to his wife, she also read it in the newspaper. She just could not understand why he did not tell her that last night.

When they went shopping, they crossed Everson Creek and she did not understand why they had to go fishing miles away having “so much water so close to home.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 220) Again, he tried to explain it to her, but he could not do it and became angry.

The next day, Claire watched on the news that the body had been identified as Susan Miller and her services were to be held in Chapel of the Pines, Summit. She decided to go to the funeral and said so to her hairdresser.



That night Claire slept on the sofa and the next morning she made her way to the funeral. She stopped for gas and Barry, a mechanic, told her the road was not good. On her way, she saw a pickup truck behind that followed her for miles. She let the other car pass and pulled over. But she heard the pickup returning, so she locked the door and rolled up the windows. The man came to her to ask if she was okay. The man kept insisting to her to open the door, but she was afraid of doing that. She could not trust men anymore with all she was going through. Then she waited for him to take the highway to continue.

After the funeral, she heard a woman say the murderer had been arrested, though the killer said he was innocent. Claire replied that he might not have acted alone, making reference to Stuart and his friend.

At home, she found Stuart at the table and she asked where Dean, their son, was. He said he was outside, and she told him she was so afraid though she could not explain it. He tried to comfort her by having sex with her, but she told him to stop; as a result, he left the house.

The story ended with Stuart coming home and telling his wife he loved her. She replied "For God's sake, Stuart, she was only a child." (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 237) It was like she still believed her husband and his friends killed the girl and she could not trust him anymore.



“The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off”²¹

At the beginning of the story, the narrator started telling that his father used to work in a saw-mill in Yakima. And for us, it seemed that Carver himself was telling us a passage of his life when his father worked there. But then, we realized that the story was narrated by Jack who talked about how Dummy, a man who used to work with his father made his father change. Of course, the similarity to Carver’s biography discussed above suggests that it was there where the story emerged.

Jack said that his father had changed so much in the wrong direction because of Pearl Harbor, also because of having to move to his grandfather’s farm, and the third thing that killed his father off was Dummy’s death.

Dummy had killed himself after killing his wife with a hammer. Jack’s father said Dummy started acting in a strange way after he got the fish he showed to him in an ad. “The fish changed Dummy’s whole personality. That’s what my father said,” said Jack. (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 198)

Dummy used to work in the same sawmill where Del, Jack’s father worked, as a cleanup man. Jack knew about Dummy because his father had told him. In the mill, there were men who used to taunt Dummy, but Del never did it. Del liked to fish, and because there were so many places to go fishing, he thought he could take Jack to Dummy’s pond to fish since he was a friend.

Del had asked him to fill the pond with some bass. He wanted to fish there; however, Dummy built an electric barrier around the lake in order to stop the local people’s fishing his bass. One day, Del and Jack came to fish despite the barrier, and

²¹ This story first appeared in “Furious Season,” one of Carver’s collections published in 1977. Then, its name was “Dummy.”



Dummy was not so happy with the idea. Del told him that the weak fishes had to be diluted in order to maintain the strong bass. But Dummy did not want anyone fishing his bass because fishing was the most important thing for him. Consequently, Del and Jack could not take any bass and they gave up.

With the pass of the days, the local river had flooded, making a new channel between the Dummy's pound and the rivers. It caused the bass moving from the pond to the river. So Dummy was very sad because nature had carried away the most important thing for him that was his fish. As a result, not only his hatred for his neighbors increased, but also his hatred for nature.

The story ended when Dummy had killed his wife with a hammer, and then he killed himself, immersing himself in the pond. Del did not believe it, so he ran to Dummy's house where many people tried to take Dummy's body out of the pond. Jack saw an arm coming up and down in the water. He also noticed that his father's attitude had changed just like Dummy's. Jack wondered, "is that what happens when a friend dies? Bad luck for the pals he left behind?" (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 212) He thought so because like Pearl Harbor and moving to his father's farm, his friend's death had done no good to his father.

"A Serious Talk"

This story was written in the third person about Vera, and her ex-husband, Burt, and in it, we can find themes of resignation, anger, feelings of being replaced, and broken relationships.



It was the day after Christmas, so the story was written in the past tense. Burt had come to visit his family on Christmas day. However, he was allowed to stay until six o'clock because Vera's new boyfriend was coming with his children for dinner. Burt had brought presents for his wife and children. He had bought her a cashmere sweater and the children told her to try it on. It was like the children wanted their parents to stay together. When his family was getting ready for dinner, Burt filled the grate with logs, took six pies from the counter, and went outside.

The next day, Burt came back to apologize for what he had done last night. He was outside waiting for his wife to come, but she was angry because she thought he tried to burn the house. After all, he came in and sat down at the table. He could see remains of the Christmas dinner of last night. While preparing coffee, Vera reminded him of Thanksgiving when she said "that was the last holiday you were going to wreck for us." (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 165) But Burt was about to wreck this holiday, too. He said he was sorry and asked for a drink. She said there was vodka and cranapple juice. When she went to the bathroom, Burt lit a cigarette. He saw the ashtray full and noticed that some butts were not Vera's brand. He became angry because he knew he was being replaced by another man.

While Vera was taking a shower, the phone rang and Burt answered it. This was someone asking for Charlie, Vera's boyfriend, and Burt told that he was not there. After a few minutes the phone rang again, and Burt said the same thing. Vera came out of the bathroom and asked him who it was, but he said "nobody." (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 167) They started arguing when the phone rang again, so she told him to hang up once she had picked up the receiver in her bedroom. After he had hung up, he



stared at the phone and decided to cut the cord. When Vera noticed that the cord had been cut, she became angry and demanded his leaving the house, otherwise she would call the police.

Burt left the house through the patio door like last night, and this time, he took the ashtray with him. There were a lot of things to be talked about, so “they had to have a serious talk soon.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 169) Burt knew he was losing his home, but he also knew that he would be unable to let his relationship with Vera end.

“The Calm”

The story was narrated by a man who was sitting in a barber chair and behind him, he saw three men. He could recognize one of the men though he could not remember from where. Bill, the barber, was cutting the narrator’s hair while he looked at him through the mirror.

His name was Charles, a bank guard. The barber asked Charles about hunting a deer, so he started to relate a story when Charles, his father, and his son went hunting. They were up on Fikle Ridge where deer used to eat apples. He said that his son attempted to kill the deer, so he began shooting till he emptied the gun. Charles tried to slay the deer, but he could not, he just “stunned him.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 240)

The deer was able to escape and they followed his blood. After following the traces of blood, the night arrived and they could not find the deer. So Charles answered to Bill that he got his deer and he did not, but after all they had venison because his father was able to kill one.



When Charles finished telling his story, one of the men, Albert, who was sitting beside the other man, told Charles he should be looking for the deer and not having a haircut. This comment disturbed Charles, so they started to fight. Bill became angry and tried to stop them. “Take it outside,” said one of the men. (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 242)As a result, the guard got up and decided to have his haircut later, and Albert also decided to leave the place a little later. Bill and the narrator stayed in the barber and he continued cutting his hair.

At the end of the story, the narrator described the calm he felt when he let the barber's fingers move through his head.

“Popular Mechanics”²²

This story containing just a few lines described how a couple was fighting, and how the woman was happy for the man's leaving the house. Once he had all his stuff packed, he claimed to let her take the baby with him. But she would not let the baby go, so she took the baby and ran to the kitchen. The man ran after her and grabbed the baby by one of the arms while she was holding the baby's other arm. They started pulling him really hard “and in this way, the issue was decided.” (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 154) It was left to the reader to decide if the baby was killed, or at least badly hurt.

²² In Carver's compilation, “Where I'm Calling From,” the name of the story was changed to “Little Thing.”



“Everything Stuck to Him”²³

The story took place in Milan with Catherine, a young girl, asking her father what it was like when she was a kid. His father decided to tell her a story when his daughter was a baby. There was a story within a story, and at the beginning, it was in the present tense, the story within the story was in the past, and the main story ended in the present again.

“They were kids themselves, but they were crazy in love...” he started and said they had a baby not long after their marriage during a cold spell in November. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 186) The young couple used to live in an apartment under a dentist's office and cleaned it every night in exchange for their rent and utilities. In the summer, they maintained the lawn and flowers, and in the winter, the boy shoveled the snow and spread salt on the pavement. In spite of their work, they were crazy in love. The young couple used to sleep in the bedroom and the baby in a crib in the living room.

One night, the father decided to call his friend Carl from the dentist's office and told him he had a baby. Also, he knew Carl was going hunting geese, so they planned to go in the morning. When he hung up, he went to tell it to his wife and she watched while he was packing his stuff. She thought he deserved to have fun, so she agreed to the idea. Additionally, she told him maybe they would go to visit her sister Sally. The girl's father admitted that he was a little in love with Sally and also with her sister Betsy. But he preferred his wife over her sisters.

²³ This story was retitled as “Distance” in Carver's later compilation, “Where I'm Calling From.”



That night, they had dinner, bathed the baby, locked the door, and went to bed. Soon, they fell asleep, but they were woken up by the baby's cries. First, the wife went to check the baby, and then she gave her to her husband. When he planned to return to bed, the baby started crying again. The girl thought the baby was sick because of the bath.

She kept rocking the baby while the boy started to get dressed. When she asked him, he said he was going hunting. His wife became angry and said he had to choose between Carl and his family. He said nothing and went outside to start the car.

When he arrived to Carl's house, he told him about the problem with the baby. Then the boy said he had to go back, so Carl went hunting alone. When the boy arrived to the apartment, he found his wife and the baby sleeping. He took off his clothes and went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

Minutes later, his wife came out and apologized to him. She finished preparing breakfast and handed it to the boy. At the table, she hugged him and they promised not to fight anymore. That was something positive his father was proud of. "That's it. End of story," he said. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 196) Then Catherine asked his father if he was going to show her the city, and he told her to put her boots on. He remembered his life and how happy he was, but now his baby had already grown.

Considering Carver's endings in other stories, this was a happy one. The man stayed by the window remembering that life. He had decided to leave everything out and stay with his family.



“What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”

This story named the collection and it tried to explain the subject of love from many points of view, though they showed the extremes where love might get. Mel McGinnis, his wife Terri, Laura, and her husband Nick who narrated the story, were sitting around the kitchen table drinking gin. They got on the subject of love. Mel thought real love was spiritual love. Terri said that Ed, her ex-boyfriend, loved her so much that he tried to kill her. Mel thought that was everything but love.

Ed used to hit her to the point of almost killing her, “but he loved me. In his own way maybe, but he loved me,” Terri said. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 171) Ed had tried to kill Terri and also Mel, so Mel thought there was no love in Ed. He used to threaten them with his “twenty-two pistol,” so they had to live like fugitives. Mel even bought a gun for self-defense for Ed told him “your days are numbered.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 173)

Ed had also attempted his own life. First, he drank rat poison, but doctors were able to save his life, and then he shot himself and died. Despite those factors, Terri still thought he did it for love and was sure he loved her. Terri and Mel had very different opinions of what love was, but they loved each other.

They continued drinking when Laura said she knew what love was for them. Nick kissed her hand and said they were lucky. Terri thought they acted like that just because they had been together for a little more than a year, but Mel proposed a toast like agreeing to what Laura and Nick considered real love.

“I’ll tell you what real love is,” said Mel. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 176) His point of view was very interesting for he emphasized the idea that it was possible to love



more than only one person. Carnal love and sentimental love were two things that he was able to explain, but he could not understand how he could have loved so much his ex-wife, but then hated her and started loving another woman. Mel's idea could be seen in Terri and Ed's relationship, too. He loved and tried to kill her, but in the end, he killed himself. Nick and Laura had also loved others before they started loving each other. Mel was also sure that if one of them, Terri or him, or Nick or Laura, died first, the other person would go out and love again. That was an excellent opinion about what love really was, though Terri thought he said that because he was getting drunk.

Mel was a cardiologist, so he also told a story about an elderly couple he had treated after they had a car crash. They were badly hurt and he had to bind up the whole body. Though the husband could not move, he got very depressed because he could not see his wife. He did not care about his wounds, but only about his wife. That was something Mel could not understand, too. It was obvious that instead of clarifying what love was, Mel and the others were getting more confused about the topic, and no one could really explain it.

The conversation continued as long as the glasses were full of gin. Mel also tried to tell that he would be a knight, but it was like he could not make himself understood once again when he said "knight were vessels to someone." (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 180) What he meant was "vassals," so Terri made him see his error. This demonstrated that no matter what Mel said about love, everybody was more confused after they tried to explain its meaning. By then, everybody was getting drunk. Mel tried to call his kids, but he did not do it for Marjorie, his ex-wife would get the phone. He hated Marjorie so much that he would kill her. In the end, he did not call.



The night had arrived and they planned to eat something. When Mel turned his glass, he spilled it out on the table. “Gin’s gone,” he said, and then they could not think of anything to talk about. (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 185) Alcohol was used to keep talking, and when it was gone, the conversation was gone too. The dark room was used as a metaphor of what had happened, since everyone left more confused about what love really was.

“One More Thing”

This story related L.D.’s drinking problem and its consequences. Maxine found him drunk again and being abusive to Rae, their daughter. Maxine and Rae were tired to live that situation in the house, so they talked about L.D.’s problem. Rae and L.D. argued about this problem and Rae tried to convince him that he had a serious problem, but he did not realized about it. In the end, Maxine and Rae asked L.D. to leave the house. He became very violent, but he agreed and went to the bedroom to prepare the suitcase. When he had everything packed, he returned walked to the door. He said goodbye and he said “I just want to say one more thing.” (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 151) However, he could not think of anything. Once the relationship among them was broken, there was nothing left to take or say.

We have arrived to the end of the review of this collection; however, there is still a lot to say about the work that consecrated and put Carver in a prestigious position in American Literature. His themes had become, in some cases, more hopeless despite he was starting a new and better life at that time. After the appearance of this work,



everything was better for Carver, and in order to support this idea, let's review the opinions of some people having influence in the literary world of America.

Tomlinson had given a deep analysis of Carver's situation during the publication of his second collection, and he ended up giving the following opinion about the debate Carver and Lish had started:

Having now read them all, I believe Gordon Lish took good stories, then transformed them into brilliant and haunting works of art. Carver was just beginning his recovery from a desperate life. He was reinventing himself as a man and author. But the sentiments he was exploring had yet to be fully realized. He seemed to be writing in order to heal his own tortured soul. But Carver was just starting to heal, just beginning, whereas the horror and despair were still evident, waiting like a cancer for someone to come along, cut them out, and hold them up to the light. (Tomlinson)

That explains why this collection contained a lot of similar characteristics with his already published works. This appeared in the moment Carver really needed a motivation to continue writing, and somehow, he got what he longed for during his whole life. "After WWTA secured Carver's fame and fortune, he asserted new control over his relationship with Lish. Lish eventually broke off their relationship, and Carver went on to explore his newfound sobriety in one heartfelt story after the next." (Tomlinson) Carver's days were numbered, but he made them real productive and transcendental for his consecration as the greatest American short story writer of our time.



Carver would have only 7 years left to continue writing, considering that this collection appeared in 1981 and his last work was published in 1988, the year of his death. In those 7 years, he reached unexpected limits, broke boundaries, and wrote exceptional masterpieces gaining more admiration and recognition than he expected.

2.3.2 Later Collections of Stories

Raymond Carver's new life had started, and he did not waste time in putting all his rehabilitated abilities, creativity, and desire to work. In his later collections of short stories, his writing environment improved, and as a consequence, many of his stories went from describing a hopeless world to talk about a world having faith. For example, in some cases, drinking was no longer shown as an addiction, but as a medium to relax. Moreover, people are getting what they had been fighting for or having a positive change, in contrast to his previous works, where change seemed something longed for, but difficult to get. Also, in previous stories, people were unable to change or reverse a bad situation, or if they changed, it was almost always to the negative side. In later collections, change was possible, and in many cases, achieved.

At this stage in Carver's life, he also acquired a more expansive style. That could be seen in the new stories he wrote and others that he rewrote. The example that most represented this change is "The Bath" and "A Small Good Thing." "The second version, nearly three times as long, goes beyond the ending of the first." (Howe) It also changed its confusing ending to a more optimistic one. The constant calls were from the baker and though Scotty had died, his parents were able to overcome their pain with the baker's help.



Additionally, among all the stories Carver had published, he created a compilation of the best and his favorite stories. This book was published in 1988, a few months before his death. Therefore, in this group of later collections by Carver, we will consider his two latest books, “Cathedral” and “Where I’m Calling From.” They can be used as tools to discover the way Carver grew as a writer and as a person.

2.3.2.1 Cathedral (1983)

“Cathedral” is Carver’s third major collection of short stories published in 1983. This collection greatly contrasts the others despite the fact that it was published only 2 years after the appearance of “What We Talk about when We Talk about Love.” From 1981 to 1982, Carver was able to write and rewrite many stories among the 12 included in this collection. In his first collection, “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” he had included 21 stories written during a period of 14 years. In his second one, the 17 stories included in it were written in 4 years, from 1976 to 1980. That means that he was able to write better and faster every time. He was the most impressed by the speed with which he wrote many stories in “Cathedral.” In an interview with Claude Grimal,²⁴ he said that “Cathedral” was special because he “never wrote a book more quickly than that one [...] it didn’t take me more than eighteen months.” (Stull) The most obvious reason is that he had all the time of the world to focus on writing once his drinking addiction was overcome and his lifestyle improved. Before 1977, he was too busy facing a number of problems that he almost gave up to writing.

²⁴ This interview was carried out in Paris and appeared in the French language. William L. Stull translated it to English and this interview appeared in his book.



Carver had plenty of time to write after 1977 because of many factors. First of all, he stopped going out for a bottle and spending his days drinking. Also, he had no longer to try many jobs to earn a living and had no children to raise. And finally, his books were being sold so good that he became a full-time writer. As an additional fact, in 1983, “Carver was the recipient of a Mildred and Harold Strauss Living stipend, a five-year annual sum of \$35,000 granted by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, that freed him from his post as a teacher of creative writing on the faculty of Syracuse.” (Weber) Having given up the teaching, he had even more time to spend at the desk. At that time, he had moved from New York to Washington. His house was in Port Angeles, where he spent the rest of his life with his new partner, Tess Gallagher.

After this process of changes, Carve finally arrived at a state of calm and dedication, and “...the advantage is that the stories in ‘Cathedral’ are more developed and that this new book will attract readers who wouldn’t have been drawn to ‘What We Talk about when We Talk about Love.’” (Stull) New readers placed eyes on him and his work making him gain more popularity and break boundaries. Some stories started to be translated and published in other countries of Europe, mainly. Later, Carver’s stories were translated into about 20 different languages, including Spanish. That fact made him gain a lot of followers in the Latin American literary world.

“Cathedral” finally was acclaimed by critics who highlighted in the great step given by Carver. About the collection, Irving Howe gave, in The New Times Book Review, the following critique:

Mr. Carver has been mostly a writer of strong but limited effects - the sort of writer who shapes and twists his material to a high point of stylization. In his



newest collection of stories, Cathedral, there are a few that suggest he is moving toward a greater ease of manner and generosity of feeling; but in most of his work it's his own presence, the hard grip of his will, that is the strongest force. It's not that he imposes moral or political judgments; in that respect, he's quite self-effacing. It's that his abrupt rhythms and compressions come to be utterly decisive. (Howe)

For example, the endings of his stories were no longer enigmatic, but they showed the characters achieving their goal and dreams, in some cases. This can be seen even in the worst situations. In "Where I'm Calling From," the narrator was locked at a center for alcoholics. The great difference from previous stories involving alcoholism is that, this time, he was there to overcome his problem and got certain awareness of his life being destroyed. In other stories, alcoholics were violent and did not intend to look for help. Therefore, drinking was still present, but even this was more optimistic.

Furthermore, when Carver was asked if his way of writing had changed, he answered "yes, very much. My style is fuller, more generous. In my second book, 'What We Talk about when We Talk about Love,' the stories were very clipped, very short, very compressed, without much emotion. In my latest book, 'Cathedral,' the stories have more range. They're fuller, stronger, more developed, and more hopeful." (Stull) The first impression we had about the stories in the collection was that they are longer, occupying more pages than others. Moreover, Carver added new elements that have not been seen in previous works and took out others; change being achieved by the characters, for example. This change in his writing can be easily seen in his compilation



“Where I’m Calling From” where he started with his first written stories to end with the latest ones. Page after page the stories become longer and more expectant in content.

When explaining his reasons for that happening he also said that “...the circumstances of my life have changed. I’ve stopped drinking, and maybe I’m more hopeful now that I’m older. I don’t know but I think it’s important that a writer change, that there be a natural development, and not a decision.” (Stull) The change was carried out and he could do nothing but take advantage of it and exploit all his aptitude to improve his work.

Carver’s personality had changed so much during those days, but he still looked like a simple man to the rest of the world. In The New Times Book Review, the critic described Carver’s physical appearance at the time of publication of Cathedral. He said “today Carver has been at his desk since just before dawn. At 45, Carver is a large man, with hair in the throes of going gray, a pudding face, the beginnings of jowls. He’s wearing a patterned polyester shirt, with an oversized, way-out-of-style collar, blue jeans and slippers that are coming apart. More than anything, he looks kind.” (Weber) He always looked kind even in his bad days when he used to act violently after some shots. But his dedication is something important to highlight since he was ready to work before the sun rose. Before, he hardly ever touched the typewriter, and when he did, he used to spend only a few hours “working on a scratch pad in the car or in the garage.” (Weber) That is another reason why the other collection took so long to be published, and why this one took him less than two years.

Moreover, the story that names the collection, “Cathedral,” is for many people the perfect story. That is why it was nominated for many awards and the winner of others. It



was included in *Best American Short Stories*, 1982. This final story in the collection made Carver receive the critical admiration he had longed for. It is usually considered to be one of Carver's finest works showing his proficiency in crafting a story. About this, Carver said that the story "seemed to be completely different from everything I'd written before, I was in a period of generosity." (Stull)

About "Cathedral," Carver said that it was the first story of the collection that he wrote. He added that the story:

...is totally different in conception and execution from any stories that have come before. I suppose it reflects a change in my life as much as it does in my way of writing. When I wrote "Cathedral" I experienced this rush and I felt, "This is what it's all about, this is the reason we do this." It was different than the stories that had come before. There was an opening up when I wrote the story. I knew I'd gone as far the other way as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone. Any farther in that direction and I'd be at a dead end—writing stuff and publishing stuff I wouldn't want to read myself, and that's the truth. (Simpson and Buzbee)

Therefore, "Cathedral" is the most representative example of this change we talk about. At the beginning of the story, this man had a lot of prejudgments about blind people. And at the end, he and the blind man were completely connected and he could finally forget all the bad things he had heard about the blind. In a further analysis about the collection, Irving Howe said that:



In “Cathedral” a few stories move past Mr. Carver’s expert tautness and venture on a less secure but finer rendering of experience. The title story is a lovely piece about a blind man who asks an acquaintance to guide his hand in sketching a cathedral he has never seen. At the end, the two hands moving together - one guided by sight and the other not - come to seem a gesture of fraternity. (Howe)

This is interesting to appreciate what Carver had done with common stories qualified as minimalistic, to make them more expansive. From then on, he said that “the term ‘minimalism’ [...] bothers me.” (Stull) It would bother anyone if the story one had worked on so hard were not given the deserved recognition. That is why we strongly believe that Carver went from being the most influential practitioner of “minimalism” to expand his style in the later stories. Supporting this argument, Lehman said “although there is ample evidence of tightly managed symbolic structures in even the most spare, pessimistic stories of Cathedral, the collection, admittedly, is Carver’s most expansive book.” (Lehman 4) In his essay, Lehman collected many opinions of renowned critics who have analyzed thoroughly Carver’s work. And still, he was able to recognize “Cathedral” as the book containing the most expansive stories, in content and style.

“The most interesting example of the changes in Mr. Carver’s work can be seen by comparing two versions of the same story,” which are “The Bath” and “A Small Good Thing.” (Howe) They have been the center of the analysis of Carver’s work for they show exactly how Carver used to be and what he had become because of the factors we mentioned above. Like “A Small Good Thing,” the stories in “Cathedral” dealt with big, and sometimes irreversible, situations, for example, the death of a loved one.



However, the people involved were able to learn something positive, and they also accepted the new circumstances they had to live in.

Irving Howe added in his review that “A few of Mr. Carver’s stories – “They’re Not Your Husband,” “Where I’m Calling From” and “A Serious Talk” - can already be counted among the masterpieces of American fiction; a number of others are very strong. But something of the emotional meagerness that he portrays seeps into the narrative. His art is an art of exclusion - many of life’s shadings and surprises, pleasures and possibilities are cut away by the stringency of his form.” (Howe) Therefore, masterpieces like Carver’s cannot stay in the unknown in our environment any longer. They need to be introduced to new readers, and even writers, so they can learn and get their own conclusions about the stories.

Moreover, among the great recognition given to the collection, “‘Cathedral’ was chosen by The Times as one of the 13 best books of 1983, and was a fiction nominee of the National Book Critics Circle.” (Weber) For some people, that was a little surprising for a short story writer to gain such acknowledgement. Novelists were the ones being most awarded at that time; therefore, with Carver’s acclaimed short stories, it was clear that this type of writing was coming back thanks to him and other writers such as Tobias Wolff, Mary Robinson, Mark Helprin, John Cheever, and many others. Moreover, “Cathedral” had sold about 20,000 copies, “an extraordinary number for a book of serious stories by a writer whose reputation has not long been established.” (Weber) All of this happened when Carver started a new life and gained popularity after 1977. Now, it is clear for us Carver had called this date as “the line of demarcation” in his life. (Weber)



To support all the arguments established above, it is time to review the stories in “Cathedral,” From the first story to the last. Then the greatness we have talked about can be discovered by the readers.

2.3.2.1.1 Storyline Synopses

“Feathers”

This story was narrated by Jack in the past tense, and described an experience he had when he and his wife, Fran, were invited to supper at Bud’s house. They were friends from work, but none of them had met each other’s wife. Jack decided to call his friend, but it was his wife, Olla, who answered the phone. He could not remember her name, so decided to hang up.

The next day, they were about to go to Bud’s house, but they did not know what to bring as a gift. Their not knowing gave the idea that they were distant from other people and did not visit others frequently. They considered taking a bottle of wine, but in the end, they just took a loaf of bread. Bud’s house was in the country, so, after a long drive, they arrived at a house with a peacock outside. They were afraid of it when Bud came out. “Shut yourself up, Joey!” he said to the peacock, and then they went into the house. Bud and Olla were welcoming to their visitors. They waited at the living room for dinner while they watched TV.

On the TV, Fran and Jack could see a plaster cast of teeth which looked awful to them. Bud said that was how Olla’s teeth looked before she had her braces on. On the other hand, Olla said it was shameful to smile so she used to put her hand up to her mouth when she laughed, but her teeth were pretty good now.



They were drinking ale and tried to find a topic to talk about. There were moments when nobody had anything to say. Then Jack told Olla it was he who called and hung up, though Olla could not remember when it was. Again, silence filled the room, so Bud said, “Well, what else is new?” like trying to break the silence. (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 343)

When they were about to sit down at the table, a baby started to cry. Olla went to check and when she came back, they had dinner. There was not much to say at the table, too. “This is real good ham,” is what Jack and Bud said once in a while, or “This sweet corn is the best sweet corn I ever ate.” (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 345) Outside, the peacock made noise and Fran asked Olla how they got him. She said she always dreamed in having one, so Bud bought him for a hundred dollars.

After dinner, the baby started crying again, so Olla took the baby into the kitchen. To Fran and Jack eyes, that was an ugly baby, and Bud said, “We know we wouldn't win no beauty contest right now.” The visitors remained in silence once again and watched at the baby they considered the ugliest they ever saw. Joey was making noise outside and Bud let him come inside. Fran and Jack said it was alright and they saw the bird in the living room. Fran asked Olla if she could hold the baby, and she handed the baby to him across the table to her. Fran had the baby, and then Joey came to the kitchen and started playing with Harold, Bud and Olla's son. Fran and Jack understood that Bud and his wife did not care about the baby's appearance. Jack had felt special at Bud's house and hoped he would always remember it.

At home, Fran told Jack “fill me up with your seed!” and it was obvious that Fran wanted to have children. And from then on, things began to change. They had a kid, a



conniving kid in Jack's opinion. Jack could clearly remember that night when they said good night. Olla had given some peacock feathers to Fran, and then they had driven home. He saw their visit to his friend's house as the beginning of the change in their lives.

"Chef's House"

"Chef's House" is a story narrated by a woman called Edna in the past tense. She was separated from her husband, Wes who, one day, called her to ask if she wanted to live again with him in his friend's house, Chef. Wes affirmed her that he had left his bad habit which was drinking and that this occasion everything would be different. After that, Edna told her "friend" that she will return with Wes, her ex-husband. Consequently, Wes also ended the relationship with his new girlfriend.

When Edna arrived to the house of Wes's friend, Chef, she was wearing her wedding ring, but at least it was the first time in two years. In that time, Edna and Wes did not work, so Wes had a good social position. In Chef's house they spent their time fishing, looking at the wonderful landscape, and watching movies. An important point here was that West did not drink.

West and Edna were very happy in the Chef's house, but soon it came to an end. One day, Chef arrived to his house and asked Wes to move to another place because he needed the house for his daughter, Linda, and her husband. Wes accepted it, since he remembered Chef's daughter as "fat Linda". Afterward, Edna and West sat down on the sofa. West was so angry and Edna tried to calm him down. At that moment, Edna started to talk about their past life, for example, their love, their life, and their children.



She told him that their children loved him; however, Wes realized that it was not true. While on the sofa, Edna told him “just suppose that nothing had ever happened. Suppose that it was the first time. Just suppose. It doesn’t hurt to suppose.” (Carver, Where I’m Coming From 301)

After that dialogue, Edna remembered the past again and realized that living in Chef’s house had its conditions. Later, she noticed that they had spent money and that both needed to work again. “Chef’s House” ended when they left the house and each one had to return to their past lives.

“Preservation”

“Preservation” is a story written in the third person and narrated by an unknown person. This described the lack of movement of Sandy’s husband whose name was never revealed. He had lost his job and though he had looked for one, he had not found any job and lay on the sofa day after day. Sandy gave him a book called “Mysteries of the Past,” about a prehistoric man who was found frozen in a bog. Like the frozen man, Sandy’s husband seemed to be frozen in time just lying on bed all the time. He even made little progress reading the book.

Sandy told a colleague about her husband’s inaction, and she told her about her uncle who spent twenty three lying on bed. This fact emphasized the lack of movement, and the extremes people could get to.

When Sandy came home, she found her husband doing nothing like always, so she went to the fridge to have some yogurt. She opened the fridge and noticed that it was not working, and the frozen food started to melt. This fact represented a potential



change in Sandy's husband. First of all, he had stood up to see what was wrong with the fridge. Then, when her husband told her that it was broken, Sandy told him they needed a new one. She also told him about an auction to be held that night and they decided to go. Once again, her husband had to move from the sofa to go to the auction, so change was starting to happen.

The auction represented another possibility in the story. Sandy's father had bought a car in an auction, and because of carbon monoxide leaking from it, he had died. So there was a possibility of a breakdown which would occur if the old fridge was not replaced. Moreover, because of the broken fridge, she had to cook some food. While she was doing it, her husband returned to the sofa, and to avoid that, she told him to sit down at the kitchen. But, instead of sitting down, he stood at the side of the table. Sandy looked at him for a while, and then, he headed for the sofa again.

At first, it seemed that Sandy's husband was thawing like the food, but his lying on the sofa again suggested that he was getting frozen like the prehistoric man.

“The Compartment”

This story is about Myers who was traveling by train to meet his son after eight years. The last time he saw his son, Myers had fought with him, and he regretted having done that.

Myers was a solitary person who worked most of his time and did not have time to share with others. While he was traveling, he looked through the window at a farmhouse surrounded by walls, and wished he could live in a place like that. It was like he liked his loneliness, and did not understand people around him. This could be



noticed in the story with a man that shared the compartment with him who spoke a different language. He was in Italy, but only his secretary and a few business associates knew he had taken vacations. The feeling of loneliness Myers lived in was reinforced by Carver placing him in a hotel room watching TV instead of going outside.

Back on the train, Myers realized that a watch he bought for his son was missing. He tried to ask the other man about the watch but they were unable to understand one another because of the different languages they spoke. So he return to the compartment and noticed that the train was going through the city. It was then that Myers realized that he did not want to meet his son because the fight was present on his mind. As a result, he stayed alone on the train looking out the window. The train made an abrupt stop causing Myers to come out it. He tried to find out if the train was heading to Paris, but no one could help him for he did not speak French. He felt alone again though there must have been many people around him.

At the end of the story, Myers was back on the train in a second class compartment, and unable to understand the people speaking around him. The train started to move faster through the country and he fell asleep. Myers would remain alone and isolated from everybody else just the way he was used to.

“A Small, Good Thing”

“A Small Good Thing” was a new version of “The Bath” included in Carver’s previous collection of short stories. It was originally named by Carver “A Small Good Thing,” but Gordon Lish, his editor published it as “The Bath.” So in this new collection, Carver gave it its original name.



This story is about a couple that lived difficult moments because of their son. It started when Ann was ordering a cake for her son's birthday, Scotty, but the baker was very strange and Ann felt a little uncomfortable. Ann was happy and tried to convince the baker that the "birthdays" were special for children, and that the cake had to be picked up on Monday.

On Monday, Scotty was to celebrate his birthday, but he suffered an accident while he was walking to school with his friend. The driver who hit Scotty was very afraid and surprised because Scotty stood up and without any wound despite the terrible misfortune he suffered. After that, Scotty returned home and his friend went on to school. At home his mother was waiting for him. He explained to his mother, Ann, what had happened and Scotty fell down unconscious on the sofa. Ann was very afraid, so she decided to call her husband, Howard, and then she called an ambulance to take her son to the hospital.

When Scotty arrived at the hospital, he was attended by Francis, the doctor. He said to Ann that her son was just sleeping, and rejected any symptom of a coma. After that, Howard arrived and noticed that Ann was focused only on his son. So, Howard decided to go to their house in order to forget what was happening to his son. On his way home, Howard thought about his life, his fatherhood, his marriage, his college, etc. When he got into the house, the phone was ringing and he immediately answered it, thinking there was news of his son, but it was not. On the phone line, a man said that the cake was ready and it had not been picked up. Howard was little confused, so he decided to hang up.



Howard returned to the hospital and found his son in the same conditions. Ann was very worried and Howard tried to comfort her. Dr. Francis entered the room and assured that their son would be okay soon. Ann told Howard that she was praying and asked him to do the same. Then they realized that what was happening was a tragedy. An hour later, Dr. Parsons entered to Scotty's room and told them that he needed to take a brain scan, but they had not to worry. After the test, Ann and Howard were waiting for some change, but Scotty's conditions were the same. In the afternoon, Dr. Parsons arrived and told them that Scotty could wake up early; however, at night, an old nurse took some blood, and it worried his parents. After that, Howard fell down in a short nap. When Howard woke up, he saw Ann, both feeling close to each other.

In that moment, Dr. Parsons came and told them the results that the tests were good, and he did not understand why Scotty did not wake up. Then he considered that Scotty was in a coma, and that they had to wait. Next, Howard convinced Ann to take a shower and rest a little at home. Ann accepted it. In the house, she found the phone ringing. It was the barker again though he did not identify himself. She thought it was news from Scotty, and "It's about Scotty, yes. It has to do with Scotty, that problem" was all the voice said before hanging up.

This was the end of the story in "The Bath." We never knew from whom the call was or if Scotty got better. There were lots of questions left unanswered in "The Bath," and one of the reasons Carver decided to rewrite it was to clarify the readers' doubts.

The story continued with Ann's calling to the hospital thinking that something had happened to her son, but when Howard answered, he assured her that there was no change in the boy. He told her about the call he received when he went first. After that,



Ann decided to go back to the hospital. There, her husband said that Dr. Parsons and a neurologist had decided to operate on Scotty to know why he had not awakened. Anna was hysterical when she knew what was going to happen. “Scotty! Look, Ann!” Howard said. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 396) Scotty opened his eyes and stared at them, but Scotty closed his eyes again. The boy took his last breath and then let go of all the air in his lungs; he had died.

With nothing else to do but grieving for their son's death, they returned home and talked with their family, trying to explain what had happened. In that moment the phone rang again. Ann answered it and the man said the same thing as the last time he called. “Your Scotty. I got him ready for you. Did you forget him?” he said and hung up again. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 399) Later, before midnight the phone rang again, and on this occasion Howard answered it very angry. The caller hung up again without saying anything, but Howard was able to hear a radio going. Then Ann realized that it was the barker, and they drove to the bakery in order to stop the constant calls from “that bastard.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 400) In the bakery, they started to tell him that they had a terrible day because of their son's death. The baker was sorry for he did not know why they had not picked up the cake, so he offered them a piece of cake because he said “eating was is a small, good thing in a time like this.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 404) Scotty's parents ate everything they could in that bakery. For a while, they forgot everything. They were able to accept their loss and did not think of leaving.



“Vitamins”

The story was narrated by an unnamed man in the past tense. He used to work at night in the hospital, “but it was a nothing job.” So he told the story of his wife Patti, who used to sell vitamins door to door.

Patti was the leader of a group of saleswomen. Sheila and Donna were part of the group and the best women when selling vitamins. Other girls had tried the job, but the majority gave up, some after a few hours and others would just try to escape by not answering the phone or disappearing

A curious incident occurred when Sheila told Patti she loved her. Patti answered she loved Sheila, too, but when Sheila made a pass at Patti, she realized what kind of love Sheila meant. Then Patti organized a party for her girls and Sheila provoked another incident. At the party, Sheila got drunk and fell asleep. An hour later, she woke up and said her little finger was broken. The narrator did not care about Sheila’s finger because he knew what she had done to Patti. Sheila also said she was quitting her job to go to Port Angeles, but she also said she needed to say good bye to Patti. The narrator opposed her doing that, so Sheila left and nobody knew anything about her.

At the same party, the narrator had danced with Donna. They hugged each other and danced until she said “not now.” He was attracted to Donna and thought of her the rest of the night. Because of it, the narrator suggested that his marriage with Patti was not going well. They spent a night drinking and talking. Patti told him she never thought she would end up selling vitamins. She could not even stop dreaming of vitamins, but he said he could not remember what he dreamed, and he thought he did not dream of



anything. That suggested the idea that the characters were feeling stuck and going nowhere in life. They talked and drank till he had to leave to work.

One night, he walked out of the hospital and saw Donna in her car. "I couldn't sleep," said Donna, so the narrator took her to Off-Broadway, a place he used to frequent. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 254) There, they hugged and kissed each other till the place filled up. Then two men, Benny and Nelson, came to them and sat down. Nelson showed them an ear he had in a box, but the narrator and Donna did not want to see it. "We have to go," the narrator said, and just then, Nelson offered money to Donna for oral sex. Nelson was interested in Donna because he said he knew she was not the narrator's wife. "No way. Fuck off," she said and left the place with the narrator. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 259)

While driving, Donna told him she was going to Portland. "...Portland's on everybody's mind these days," she said while he was going to his car. (Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 262)

He came back home and went to the bathroom. Then Patti opened the door and became wild for she said he had let her oversleep. He told Patti to go back to sleep while he was looking for an aspirin for her. He "knocked everything out of the medicine chest." (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 263) He did not care. He just let things keep falling just like his life was falling apart, once Donna had left, and he felt stuck with his "nothing job" without a chance to escape like the rest.



“Careful”

“Careful” relates the story of Lloyd, who was recently separated from his wife Inez. He decided to move into a small room, where he was trying to quit drinking. His landlady lived below him. One day, Lloyd saw an old woman who had a chronic disease. She seemed to be asleep, so he thought that she might be dead. However, Lloyd continued on his way to his room. In those days, he drank champagne and he spent his days drinking. Sometimes, he forgot to drink coffee when he woke up. It was one of the principal reasons that his wife left him.

The story started when his wife came to visit him two weeks after he moved there. Inez arrived to the house while Lloyd was drinking. When he realized his wife was coming upstairs, he tried to hide the bottle of champagne. But it was too late because she noticed what he had been doing. In that moment, Lloyd told his wife that he had a terrible earache, and he asked her to call the doctor. And Inez told him we “have thing to talk about;” however, she needed to solve her husband’s problems. Then she remembered she had had a similar earache, like his, but it was because she was naughty. For that reason, Inez promised her to be “careful” from then on.

Inez went to look for tissue paper in the bathroom, and Lloyd tried to look for the way to tell her what was happening with his addiction. When Inez left the bathroom, she called him, but he could not hear her for his pain. After that, she used a champagne glass in order to prepare the oil, and she put warm liquid in Lloyd’s ear. Consequently, she caught the liquid from the ear with a towel. As a result, Lloyd was able to hear Inez telling him that they had to go to eat and they needed to talk before going to bed. Inez told him that she did not want to sleep by his side, so they started to argue again. At the



end, something funny happened. He woke up and tried to drink champagne, but he took the bottle which contained the oil that his wife had prepared and drank it. The message was that you have to be careful.

“Where I’m Calling From”

The story was narrated by a man whose name was never revealed. He related many stories about the people at Frank Martin’s drying-out facilities, so the story was in the present tense, but the stories the narrator told were in the past. Two of the people he told stories about were J.P. and Tiny.

That was the narrator’s second time at Frank Martin’s, and there he met J.P. who had this strange trembling of the hands when he talked. Tiny, on the other hand, had been there for two weeks, and he was going home in two days.

J.P., like everyone at the center, had a problem with alcohol. They knew that was a problem, but they just could not stop. That suggested the idea of lack of control in the alcoholics.

The narrator told many stories about J.P. and other people as if trying to avoid his own problem. J.P. told him a story when he was a child. J.P. had fallen into a well, suffering all kinds of terrors in there. Everything was different in the well; he could see the blue sky and birds flying and also thought something could fall on his head. Then his dad came with a rope and J.P. could get out.

After that, J.P. started another story at the narrator’s request. He said that after graduating from college, he had had nothing in mind to do. J.P. had gone to a friend’s house to spend the day drinking beer and playing records, when he met a woman who



was sweeping the chimney. She was Roxy, and he was attracted to her. J.P. decided to do the same job she did. "Then what?" the narrator said. (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 283) He was interested in hearing his story to escape his own reality.

J.P. continued with his story, saying that Roxy and he started going out and shared time cleaning chimneys. Eventually, he married Roxy and had children. Everything was going fine for J.P., but then drinking became a problem. Every time J.P. stopped talking, the narrator insisted that he continue. "It's taking me away from my own situation," the narrator said. Again the idea of escape was present. J.P. continued talking, and he said that things got worse for him and Roxy. They started having constant fights, and Roxy found another boyfriend. Later J.P. was arrested for driving drunk. Eventually, J.P. came to the center for alcoholics to get back his life, like the rest of people there.

At every opportunity they had to talk, the narrator asked J.P. to tell him about his life. The only reason was forgetting his own problems for a while. Moreover, J.P. also tried to escape from his reality. When Frank Martin told them a story about Jack London, J.P. said he wished he had a name like that.

The first time the narrator had come to the center, his wife took him there. A part of him wanted help, but the other part did not. The second time, his girlfriend had taken him there. His wife had asked him to leave the house because of his problem. He tried to call her on New Year's Eve, but there was no answer. Two weeks before, they had screamed at each other on the phone, but now he wanted to talk to her because he still had a thing at her house. He also wanted to talk to his girlfriend, but he did not want to discuss her health problems with her.



At the end of the story, the narrator started to think about the house where he and his wife used to live. One morning, in the house, they heard a sound outside. It was the landlord coming to paint the house. The narrator just did nothing but saw the man working. Then he leaned back and thought about calling his wife or his girlfriend. He wanted to wish her a Happy New Year, and he also said that “She’ll ask me where I’m calling from, and I’ll have to tell her.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 196) He was starting to face his own situation instead of escaping from it. He just could not decide on calling his wife or his girlfriend first.

“The Train”

This story was written to express the idea of isolation and desperation. Another important fact about it is that this story was a follow up of a John Cheever’s story “The Five-Forty-Eight.” The story was narrated in the third person, and it started with Miss Dent pointing with a gun at a man for no known reason. That was an abrupt beginning considering that Miss Dent was desperate and got to extremes without explaining why.

Miss Dent left the man and sat down in the waiting room of the train station. There was nobody else there, so she was completely isolated from the rest of the world until a woman and an old man came in. She noticed that the old man had no shoes, and then he tried to light a cigarette, but he could not find a match. Then the couple began to talk, though there was no real understanding of what was wrong with them. They talked about people and an incident that had happened; however, that was something never explained. The only thing we got to understand was that the woman became



desperate because there was nobody else to worry about the old man. So lack of connection was also present in the story.

After a while, the woman started to talk to Miss Dent, and they asked for each other's names. Then Miss Dent went to the water fountain where she and the old man exchange words. She told him that she almost killed a man with a gun she had on her pocket. As she finished saying that, the train pulled into the station, so they moved to the platform. There, the passengers saw the three of them possibly thinking that they were together. But the truth was that they were very isolated from each other. This was another attempt of connection, but like the conversation between the woman and the old man, it was not possible to establish connection and the idea of isolation remained.

At the end of the story, the woman and the old man were seated together and Miss Dent was seated alone behind them. There was a lot of mystery since the story ended without telling what made Miss Dent point a man with a gun, or why had happened with the old man to lose his shoes, or what was the relationship between the woman and him.

“Fever”

The story started emphasizing that Carlyle's wife had left him with his two children. Because of that, the story had ideas of desperation in his trying to find a sitter. Desperate, Carlyle hired Debbie, a young girl who said she loved children, and Carlyle trusted her that he gave her important roles in the house. Then Carlyle was able to work normally as a teacher. However, after a week, he came early from work and found his children, Sarah and Keith, crying in the front yard and music so loud coming from inside



the house. Debbie had been drinking beer in the house with some boys instead of taking care of the children. He became angry and demanded the boys and Debbie to get out of the house.

After that incident, Carlyle started to look for another sitter without much success. Eileen, his former wife, had left him for his colleague at high school, Richard Hoopes, to start a new life by herself. Then she called him knowing that things were not good with the children. She suggested calling Mrs. Weber, a woman who looked after things for Richard's mother. They also talked about their children and their past life, and Carlyle felt like he missed his wife. After he hung up, the phone rang again. It was Mrs. Weber, who agreed to start working the next morning. With this call, Carlyle finally had someone to trust.

Before talking to Eileen, Carlyle had talked to Carol, his girlfriend, telling her what had happened to Debbie. "Honey, don't let it get you down," she said, and her words made him feel more relaxed. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 307) It was clear that he needed to rearrange his life without Eileen. At school, he asked Carol to come over that night, and she agreed. However, she left the house soon and Carlyle was left by himself again.

When Mrs. Weber arrived, things got better in the house. Everything was fine when he arrived from work, and he could focus on his own life.

Six weeks later, since Mrs. Weber arrival, "Carlyle's life had undergone a number of changes." (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* ,320, 321) First of all, he started to accept the fact that Eileen was not coming back though he still loved her. Moreover, Mrs. Weber had things going great in the house, but this was about to change, too. One



day, Carlyle woke up feeling sick and stayed in bed while Mrs. Weber was in charge of everything. She told him he had a fever and helped him to feel better.

When he felt better, Mrs. Weber told him she was moving to Oregon with her husband. But just then he received a call from Eileen. Somehow, she knew what was happening in the house, and she told him to write how he felt and thought in his journal. Just as he hung up, Mrs. Weber came in and told him what he was about to do. She and her husband were old and needed a place to be safe. Carlyle accepted her decision and began to tell her about his wife. "...my wife and I loved each other ... We thought ... we'd grow old together," he said, and then realized that whatever they did, they did it without the other. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 329) Carlyle began to accept that his wife had gone and would not come back.

The story ended with Mrs. Weber and her husband leaving the house. Before leaving, she told him "You're both going to be okay after this is over," and Carlyle knew that a new life was beginning for him and his children. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 331) He stood at the door and saw her get into her husband's old pickup truck and went away.

"The Bridle"

Marge, the manager of an apartment complex in Arizona, let us know the lives of the residents and her own life. The story was written in the first person and themes of isolation and a feeling of being trapped were present in it.

Marge was looking out the window when she saw a car pulling up. They were Holits, his wife Betty, and their two children, who came from Minnesota and tried to find



a place to stay. After introducing herself, we learned that Marge was also a stylist. Whenever she introduced herself, she mentioned her profession as if she identified herself and other people by their occupation.

When Marge and Harley, her partner, went to watch some home-made movies with the residents, Irving and Linda, she noticed that both of them were obsessed with Irving's first wife, Evelyn. He still felt some affection since Evelyn died, and Linda also pointed out to Evelyn every time she appeared in the movie. They seemed to be stuck in the past.

In the whole story, ideas of being trapped were highlighted. Marge was looking through the window all the time, like watching what was happening outside, while she was stuck in her world by herself. While she was looking out the window, she saw Holits about to jump off the cabana into the pool. But he fell on the deck because he was not fat enough; however, he decided not to go to the hospital. The idea of being trapped was again presented in the story.

Days after the accident, Holits and Betty decided to leave the apartment. Betty hoped to have a refund of the deposit for the apartment, but Harley seemed to disagree. After that, Holits and Marge went to the apartment to see if everything was in order. She was obsessed with the apartment being left clean and in order. Just then, she saw one of the drawers opened and found a bridle in it. She looked at the bridle for a while as if realizing she was trapped.



“Cathedral”

This story was narrated by a man whose name was never mentioned. His wife was about to get the visit of a friend with whom she had worked a long time ago. Her husband was not enthusiastic about the visit since his wife’s friend was blind. At first, he had not a good opinion of blind people; he thought they were slow people who never smiled.

She had worked with the blind man as his helper, and when she was leaving, he asked her if he could touch every part of her face. That was something she could not forget and even wrote a poem about it recalling the way his finger moved around over her face. After her leaving, she and the blind man had married. Her husband read the poem and knew she and the blind man were in contact. They used to call and send letters and tapes to each other.

“If you love me, you can do this for me,” she said and added that she would do the same for him. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 159) She went to pick the blind man up, and when she came back with him, they laughed in the car. She introduced her husband to Robert, the blind man. The narrator saw his wife did not take her eyes off the man, and when she finally looked at her husband, he “had the feeling she did not like what she saw.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 362)

He was impressed with seeing a blind man for the first time. He offered him a drink and something to eat. After they finished eating, Robert and she talked to each other about things that had happened to them. They seemed to forget that the narrator was just by their side. It was like he became jealous to have this man attracting all the attention of his wife. He just joined in the conversation occasionally, and then turned on



the TV. This is an important fact in the story because the two men would get closer to each other because of a program on TV. His wife, on the other hand, looked at him with irritation and then asked Robert if he had a TV. They did not expect to hear as an answer that he had two TVs, a color set and a black-and-white TV. But what impressed them the most was hearing that he man preferred to turn on the color set.

The woman left the room to put on her robe and the blind man and the narrator were left alone. The narrator could not find anything to talk about. He just offered another drink and they smoked some cannabis. When his wife came back, she gave him a savage look for what he had done. The constant looks of irritation and anger she gave to her husband were the only way to show him her disagreement with his decisions.

They talked a little and the woman fell asleep on the sofa. Once again, the man was left alone with the blind man, though he did not want to. The blind man did not feel uncomfortable in the presence of the narrator, and he even wanted to talk to him. On TV, a program about the church and the Middle Ages was going on. He could see cathedrals in many cities of Europe, so he tried to explain what they were like. The narrator asked him if he knew something about cathedrals, and the visitor answered that what he just heard on TV was all he knew about them. Therefore, he asked him to describe one of them. At first, he did not know what to say, but then he said they were very tall and were made of stone or marble. That was all he could say since “cathedrals” did not mean too much for him.

Then Robert asked him for some heavy paper and a pencil to draw a cathedral together. The blind man took the other man’s hand and asked him to draw. He drew a



box and added a roof. Then he added some details like spires, and flying buttresses. “Terrific. You’re doing fine,” Robert said, and when they finished, he felt over around over the paper, just like he had done on the woman’s face. (Carver, Where I’m Coming From 373)

They continued drawing when the woman opened her eyes. “What are you doing?” she said and Robert answered they were drawing a cathedral. (Carver, Where I’m Coming From 374) “Close your eyes now,” he said and the narrator did it. (Carver, Where I’m Coming From 374) When they finished, Robert asked him to see what they drew, but he kept his eyes closed. He understood how Robert was able to see things by feeling with the fingers. That was something he had never felt before.

With this story, Carver ended his new collection, so, in conclusion, these stories that have been published in this book are the clearest example of how Carver’s work has become more hopeful and expansive from being short and hopeless. There were award-winning stories included in this collection, and other stories were nominated for the most prestigious prizes. “Cathedral” was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize on Literature in the year of its publication. This prize, that has been awarded to the best writers in literature, journalism, and other areas, is considered one of the most important achievements for a writer. The simple fact of being nominated is an honor for any writer in America. This helps us to have a real perspective of how acclaimed Carver’s work became.

Furthermore, as many of his previous stories, the ones that appeared in “Cathedral” were “set in the isolated, working-class, environment of the Northwest.”



(Weber) But when he moved to the South, places like San Francisco, Sacramento, Eureka, and other cities were used as a set for his stories.

Moreover, about the collection, Carver had said that he wrote all the stories in the collection in eighteen months “and in every one of them I feel this difference.” (Simpson and Buzbee) The difference in his feeling that made him write the stories we know in “Cathedral,” and the one that helped him reach the top.

It seems that every factor, small or big, had considerable consequences in Carver’s career. A young, desperate, and inexperienced Carver wrote stories about young people fighting a constant war and dying in it, or about adult people who hardly ever got what they longed for. A mature, generous, experienced, and famous Carver, on the other hand, wrote about people fighting and surviving in that war with an important change of mind and attitude. This was an important change in Carver himself when his life turned into a comfortable life after a long road of misery. But Carver still had a lot of things to give, many stories to write, and so much recognition to gain though his health was deteriorating little by little as a consequence of his bad days.

In history, we can find the greatest mind and the biggest writers, among other celebrities, getting to the end of their lives, but remaining alive in the people’s mind for their job. In his case, Carver made a last contribution to be remembered long after his death. This was his last work we will review, “Where I’m Calling From.”

2.3.2.2 Where I’m Calling From (1988)

“Where I’m Calling From” is Carver’s last contribution to American literature. In this book, he collected a lot of stories published before in “Will You Please Be Quiet,



Please?,” “What We Talk about when We Talk about Love,” and “Cathedral.” The difference between this book and the others was that this is a compilation of Carver’s best and favorite stories. Moreover, there are new stories included in the last pages of the book that Carver wrote before he died. This was something Carver had in mind a long time before the production of the book. When asked about his favorite stories, he said that they were “‘Cathedral,’ and ‘A Small Good Thing.’” (Stull) He added, “I’d like to publish a ‘selected stories,’ but certainly not a complete collection of my stories.” (Stull) So “Where I’m Calling From” was created to fulfill his desire of having a book with only the stories he liked the most. According to him, these were stories he considered perfect, his favorite ones, and also there were others that he did not like anymore, “...but I won’t tell you which ones,” Carver said. (Stull) Thus, all the stories found in the book make of this a deluxe collection in which only Carver’s favorites are included.

The book compiled 30 of Carver’s best stories included in his three major collections. Among the selected stories that Carver gathered in the book we have these:

	Nobody Said Anything
	Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes
	The Student’s Wife
	They’re Not Your Husband
	What Do You Do In San Francisco?
	Fat
	What’s In Alaska?
WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET,	Neighbors
PLEASE?	Put Yourself In My Shoes



	Collectors
	Why, Honey?
	Are These Actual Miles?
	Gazebo
	One More Thing
	Little Thing
	Why Don't You Dance?
	A Serious Talk
WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE	What We Talk About When We Talk About Love
	Distance
	The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off
	So Much Water So Close To Home
	The Calm
	Vitamins
	Careful
	Where I'm Calling From
CATHEDRAL	Chef's House
	Fever
	Feathers
	Cathedral



A Small, Good Thing

As we said, in this compilation, there are also included 7 new stories that Carver wrote near the end of his life. They are the latest stories, and among them we have these ones:

Boxes

Whoever Was Using This Bed

Intimacy

Menudo

Elephant

Blackbird Pie

Errand

Even in these final stories, it is also possible to connect Carver's fiction with his own life. The first example of it that we noted was that, in "Whoever Was Using This Bed," the characters received strange calls every night. They decided to unplug the phone in order to be left alone. That is something Carver used to do in real life to forget the outside world and to be able to work on his stories. So, coincidence or not, this is another element of his life that influenced his writing. Moreover, the constant moving city to city, his family, and what Carver himself went through during their whole life is represented in "Boxes." In that story, the narrator's mother and father used to move very frequently, and when the father died, she continued moving. In the American culture, people moving to another city is something typical, but Carver's family had lived in a lot of cities on the West and parts of the East coasts. Therefore, the idea of writing about



important aspects of his life accompanied him till his last days. The “spark” that initiated a story came from his own experiences, and a lot of imagination helped him with his fiction.

In “Elephant,” moreover, it was like Carver himself was narrating the story. We thought so because of the great similarity of the life of the narrator of the story and Carver’s life. First of all, Carver had a son, a daughter, a brother, his mother, and his father had died, just like the main character of the story. But in the story, we could appreciate how Carver added his impressive skill to create fiction and made of it an amazing story. Additionally, like the rest of Carver’s later stories, this had a positive ending. It did not matter how many problems the man and his family had. At the end, he was able to accept everything and was glad to have a family.

“Intimacy,” just like in the other new stories included in this last compilation, the readers can relate the events of the story with Carver’s own life. This is because the narrator of the story seemed to be someone famous, since he often appeared in magazines and newspapers. Another analogy that readers can establish between the story and Carver’s own life is the fact that the narrator had divorced his wife. It was like Carver was relating the story, describing the experiences he lived when he decided to visit her. But all she did was complaining for the things she had to go through by his side. It is like Maryann, his former wife, was describing what she had suffered when she was still living with Carver. Finally, the narrator described himself as a big guy, and Carver himself was big in real life.

Furthermore, it is even clearer to notice how his life influenced his work in his last story, the last he ever wrote, “Errand.” The main character is Chekhov, the great



Russian short story writer, considered the best story writer of any time. “He loved all the 19th-century Russians,” Jay McInerney said in his book review published in The New York Times. But Chekhov was the author he admired the most, and thus, he became Carver’s most important influence. In “Errand” Carver talked about Chekhov’s final days and death. The story was finished only a few days before Carver himself died. He had been to the hospital more frequently everytime since a year before he died, so he knew he was going to die. It was like Carver felt his end close, so he decided to write of how even great, respected and famous people surrender when their bodies are too fragile or damaged to continue living.

All these new stories were written in the first person, with exception of “Errand,” that talks about Chekhov and not about someone’s own experience. This was not a conscious decision Carver made, but in these cases, for us, there were more events and experiences found in his own life than in other stories. “Much of Carver’s fiction sounds like that life,” were Weber’s words in his book review that supports this argument, and it can be noticed even more in the stories we will review.

In the following review, we will consider only the new and last stories that were included at the end of the book. We will notice that the narrator of the stories can be identified as Carver himself.

2.3.2.2.1 Storyline Synopses

“Boxes”

The story was narrated by an unmanned man whose mother was moving from Longview to California. She invited her son and his wife for a good-bye meal, though



Jill, her son's wife, was not happy to go because the narrator's mother did not like Jill very much. But in the end, she said she would go.

The mother had decided to leave the place in the winter. It was June and boxes had been sitting around the house for months. During that period of time, she had invited her son for dinner many times, but she never actually left the city.

When she decided to move, the narrator had told her that was not a good idea, but she moved anyway. And after a month, she said she hated the place. The narrator's mother always had this negative attitude for everything and everybody, so she blamed her son. She said it was too hot in summer and too cold in winter. Moreover, she said her son never had time for her.

She had started to move when her husband lost his job. They decided to sell their home and move to a place where things would be better. But once they got there, things did not improve, so they moved again to another city. "They were like migrating animals," the narrator said. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 414) Then her husband died, but she did not stop moving. "She talked bitterly about the place she was leaving and optimistically about the place she was going to," her son said. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 414-415)

At her house in Longview, she was waiting for her son and his wife, and when they came in, she started talking negatively. She referred to things as the worst she ever had. Then she said she would move to the same apartment she lived in California, but to a different room

As the narrator finished eating, they saw Larry Hadlock, the landlord, with his mower to cut the grass. Then Jill decided to tell about her son. He was unable to sleep



at night for thinking about his mother. The mother replied she also felt terrible because she could not find a place where to be happy. The narrator was so affected by his mother's decision that he leaned and covered his face with his hands. "He's going crazy with worry over you," Jill said.

Two days later, the narrator's mother said good-bye and drove away. A few days later, she called to say that she was happy to be back in sunny California and was busy unpacking. However, she also said there was pollen in the air that made her sneeze a lot and the traffic is heavier than she remembered. For a moment, the narrator did not say anything. He just remembered the days when his father was alive and his mother was happy. Then he said good bye and hung up.

At the end of the story, the narrator stood by the window watching a car pulling into a driveway and the porch light going on. Jill said something to him, but he did not look. He kept looking at the people outside, who embraced for a minute and then they went inside. That was what he always longed for; a normal family that could be happy living together.

"Whoever Was Using This Bed"

The tale was narrated by Jack, and it was in the present tense, referring to themes of uncertainty and death. The narrator related a situation lived by him and his wife, Iris, who received a call at 3 AM, when they were sleeping, from a strange woman asking for Bud.

Iris was a little afraid and angry because of the calls, so she asked Jack to answer the phone. When Jack did it, he told her that she had the wrong number, and



Jack hung up. After a while, the phone rang again, and when Jack answered, this was the same woman. Jack decided to hang up the phone for a second time.

When Jack returned to his bedroom, he found Iris smoking a cigarette. Jack tried to calm her down telling that his former wife and children used to do that in order to bother him. After that, Iris told her husband that while the phone was ringing, she had a dream, but she could not remember it. Jack did not pay much attention to Iris's dream because he used to have the same experiences with his former wife. She used to tell him her dreams in great detail. Then Iris threw her cigarette out and instantly fastened another. She almost remembered the details of her dream, but she said Jack was not in there. That made him get upset.

They spent the night talking. Jack was aware that time was passing by, so he tried to sleep, because he needed to wake up early to work. Then they started to talk about Iris' dreams, but they ended up talking about death; the way that they could die. They also talked about their families and the way they died. They wondered if they would die in the same or a different way. At dawn, Jack went to his work, and throughout the day, he thought about the conversation with his wife, and his exhaustion because of the bad night.

The story ended with the phone ringing again that night. Jack answered it, and it was the same woman asking for Bud, so they decided to unplug the phone every night in a year. This became a habit for them.



“Intimacy”

This story was narrated by an unnamed man who had some business out west; therefore, he stopped in the town where his former wife lived. They had not seen each other in a long time, so, when he decided to visit her, he did not know what he was going to find at her house.

When he reached his door, she did not seem surprised and let him come in the house. Immediately, she started complaining about all the things he had done to her. For example, she said he had “caused her anguish, made her feel exposed and humiliated.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 444) In the story, he talked very little and only listened to what she had to say.

“Let go of the past,” she told him, and then added she thought he was crazy. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 445) She continued by saying she wanted to be left in peace to start a new life. And, since she was the only one talking, she said she loved him so much once, and she could not believe how intimate they were. After that, she reminded him the day when she was about to pull a knife on him. However, she had not used it, and she was sorry for not doing him even a small mark on his skin.

Then she continued insulting him. She said their difference was that he was a liar while she always spoke the truth. She even told him that if he suddenly burst in fire, she would not save him. All her love had turned into hatred.

Another thing she had to say was that she stopped living when he went away. She added that her heart broke, and he, on the other hand, found somebody else to be happy with. She said she knew his heart very well, which was “a dark forest, it's a garbage pail...” but she no longer cared. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 449)



She continued talking when, suddenly, he found himself on his knees and taking the hem of her dress. He could not even understand why he was doing that, but he thought it was there where he ought to be. She told him to stand up because her husband was arriving soon. Then she said she forgave him for everything to make him stand up. "Come on now, you have to get out of here. Get up. [...] You're still a big guy, aren't you," she said, pleading him to get on his feet.

When he finally got up, she walked with him to the door. None of them knew if they would meet again, so, when he said good-bye, she did not say anything. He moved down the sidewalk, and he saw some kids on the street. The street was full of leaves, so he thought "somebody ought to make an effort here." (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 453) It was like Carver used the disaster as a metaphor of the mess that the man had made with his life, and that he had to work hard to fix it.

"Menudo"

"Menudo" is a story about a man who had a hard time thinking about the three women in his life, his wife Vicky, his former wife Molly, and Oliver's wife Amanda.

It began in the middle of the night when the man could not sleep while his wife, Vicky, was completely asleep. After the man got up, he looked through his bedroom's window at his neighbors' house. He noticed Oliver's wife, Amanda, could not sleep, too.

That night, he recalled the days when he started to feel a sexual desire for Amanda. They have the same feeling; therefore, they ended up satisfying each other. But Oliver discovered the fatal betrayal between his wife and his neighbor, so he decided to go out of his house and told Amanda she had only a week to leave.



Consequently, Vicky also discovered the kind of relationship her husband and Oliver's wife had. Vicky was angry; he tried to talk to her, but he thought she would say something like "You bastard. Don't you dare touch me..." (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 465)

During the story, the man remembered his mother and his ex-wife, Molly, who seemed to be going crazy. He realized that Molly loved him so much, unconditionally. However, when he separated from her, he sent Molly to a mental institution, because he thought she was crazy.

The narrator kept looking at Amanda while she moved through her house. He started to remember other things like the night at Alfredo's house. The man said she was going crazy, too, so they drank and listened to records. He began to shake and his friend sat by his side and wondered what was going on with him. He said he would prepare Menudo that was a Latino stew made of tripe, sausage, onions, tomatoes, chili powder, and other ingredients. His friend assured him that it would calm him down. But the man fell asleep before the Menudo was ready; as a consequence, the man could not have it.

The story ended at dawn after a long night of insomnia. The man had reflected about his three women, and once he noticed that there were some leaves in the yard, he decided to rank the lawn. His neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Baxter, watched him doing that. It could be seen as his decision to fix things in his life.



“Elephant”

The story was in the first person, so the narrator began talking about his brother, Bill, who was asking for money to solve his economic problems. Bill lived in California, and he could lose his house if he did not make the payment. The narrator did not know his brother’s house, but he did not want him to lose it. Thus Bill said to him if he give the money, he would pay in February. He had lost his job, and to make things worse, his wife was diabetic, and she needed treatment.

Billy’s economic situation was serious, so to solve the other debts, he had to sell his wife’s cars and their TV, waiting for the best offer. In that conversation, they also talked about their mother and her problems. The narrator used to send her money every month, and when he gave the money to Bill, he said Bill should pay the money back to their mother. However, it did not happen. In three months, Bill said he paid seventy-five dollars, but she said it was only fifty. When Bill’s situation became worse, he said he would not be able to pay the money either to him or to his mother.

The narrator said he had to send money to other people, too; his ex-wife and his daughter who had children to feed. He said his daughter lived with a bum who did not work, so he had to help her until she was able to get a job. Moreover, his son also needed money for college. When he said he could not send more money, his son said he would deal with drugs, so he had no option. Up to here, the narrator had four people he was sending money to, “not counting my brother,” Bill. (Carver, Where I'm Coming From 478)

He “was paying out nearly as much money every month as I was bringing in,” and things were getting worse. Getting a loan and quitting eating were some things he had



to do. Furthermore, he could not buy new clothes and his car was falling apart. He told them he would not be able to send more money and that he was moving to Australia, so they said they would try to get money for themselves.

When he thought things could not be worse, Billy called to ask for a thousand dollars, “a thousand!” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 483) The last time he had asked for five hundred, but he had not paid them. First, the man said he could not do it, but in the end, he asked for more credit from the bank and sent the money to him. Billy had promised he would pay him back, but when the time came, he said he was not able to do it. Furthermore, his daughter also called and said she needed money to replace the furniture that had been stolen from her house. His son mailed him a letter asking for money for a ticket to Germany. The narrator put more checks in the mail, and “held my breath and waited.” (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 485)

While waiting, he had this dream where he was a child riding on his father’s shoulders, pretending his father was an elephant. He woke up, and when he got in bed again, he had another dream about his ex-wife and his children. First, they were on a blanket close to some water, and suddenly he was kicking his son’s car, threatening his life.

Somehow, when he woke up, he felt incredibly better. He wished everyone in his family to be well despite all the troubles they caused him. He was happy to have them and wished them luck after all, even his ex-wife. Even the day was shinier than others to him, so that he decided to walk to work. While he was walking, a friend of his, George, offered him a ride to work. They were driving really fast, as if they were late to work, but they did it. George accelerated and both of them flew in the car.



“Blackbird Pie”

The story began with a man receiving a letter under his door at night. On the envelope, the name of the man was written, so he thought that it was from his wife who had lived with him during twenty-three long years. But he said it was not her handwriting.

He had lost the letter, but he had such excellent memory that he could remember it in great detail. In the letter, his wife’s feelings were expressed, but he did not understand who could have written it, since that was not her handwriting. “...if it wasn’t her handwriting, who on earth *had* written these lines?” he wondered. (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 494) At this point, the narrator gave a little insight of his life with her. She was with him the night he received that letter.

That night, his wife had said “Are you planning to be in your room this evening?” (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 497) He interpreted that question as her decision of leaving, and she wanted to make sure he would be in his room to leave him a letter under his door. When he was in his room, the letter was slipped under the door. He tried to investigate and thought of his wife having some problems, but he kept on reading the letter. Then he heard someone talking on the telephone, talking as if he did not want to be heard. Later, the person who was calling decided to hang up. He was afraid about that situation he lived in his own house.

He returned to his room and continued reading the letter. Suddenly, the principal door of the house sounded, so the man determined to go in order to know what was happening. He noticed that his wife had left the house. That night was foggy, so he could hardly see outside. Then a horse stepped out of the fog, and later, another one.



He saw his wife standing beside one of the horses, and as expected, he did not understand anything about it.

He was confused to see his wife dressed in her best clothes, a suitcase on the porch, and two horses outside the house. When he asked her, she said “you didn’t read my letter, did you?” (Carver, Where I’m Coming From 503) But he knew he had not finished it. She was talking when two men with cowboy hats came out of a pickup. He was even more confused when she told him she had called the sheriff’s department when she saw the horses. Moreover, in the letter, she had written she was leaving him. She also said she needed a ride to town and the deputy had come to make him respect her decision.

The man said good bye to his wife, who was dressing in the same way as at the funeral of his wife’s mother, but the only thing that was not the same was the veil. Then the deputy helped her with the suitcase and drove away with her on board.

Finally, as they drove off, the man remembered some pictures of his wife holding her wedding bouquet. There was also another picture when his wife was pregnant after three months. She was gone, but he longed that she came back soon. The story ended when the man threw the photos on the floor saying good bye to his darling.

“Errand”

This story relates Chekhov’s final days. He had died in 1904, and the story started on the evening of March 22, 1897 when he was having dinner with his friend Alexei Suvorin in a very luxurious restaurant. Suddenly, “blood began gushing from”



Chekhov's mouth. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 513) Suvorin took his friend to his hotel suite and then to a clinic.

His sister, Maria Chekhov, had gone to the hospital to visit him, and, among the presents brought by his friends and followers, she saw a drawing of Chekhov's lungs done by a doctor, that showed his disease. He had tuberculosis.

Moreover, among other celebrities, Leo Tolstoy visited him in the hospital. But they seemed to talk about everything but his health conditions. Tolstoy assumed that all of us would live on in a principle like reason or love. Furthermore, none of them believe in an after death.

It was clear that Chekhov's conditions were bad, though he always tried to minimize the seriousness of his disease. In a letter he wrote to his sister, he said he was feeling better and even "getting fat." (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 515)

In June, 1904, Chekhov had gone to Badenweiler, a resort city, to die. That month, he had traveled from Moscow to Berlin by train with his wife Olga Knipper, an actress he had married in 1901. There, he consulted with a specialist in pulmonary disorders, Dr. Karl Ewald. But, after checking him, he was shocked by his conditions. He "was furious with himself for not being able to work miracles," Carver wrote. (Carver, *Where I'm Coming From* 516) As days passed by, Chekhov's condition became worse.

At Badenweiler, Dr. Schwöhrer examined Chekhov and prescribed a diet of cocoa, oatmeal with butter, and strawberry tea to help him sleep. But, despite all the cares, he had only a few weeks of life. On July 2, Olga tried to find help when she noticed Chekhov as delirious, and Dr. Schwöhrer ran to the room. No matter what the doctor did, he knew that his end was near. He intended to send for oxygen, but



Chekhov himself knew it, because he said “What’s the use? Before it arrives I’ll be a corpse.” (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 518) After a while, the doctor had asked for a bottle of champagne; there was no toast, though Chekhov was able to hold the glass, but after that, Chekhov’s breathing stopped.

When the daylight arrived, she asked a young boy to go out and bring back a mortician, “the most respected mortician ... a mortician worthy of a great artist.” (Carver, *Where I’m Coming From* 524) The pain in Olga was great, even the young man was shocked because of the irreparable loss of the greatest short-story writer of any time.

Finally, we have arrived at the end of the review of Carver’s collections of short stories, so, in conclusion, we noticed that the characters developed by Carver at the end of his career want more than economic success. “They yearn for serenity rather than achievement,” Weber wrote in his book review. Let’s take into consideration the man in “Elephant,” one of his final stories, in which the narrator, at the end of the story, was happy for having a family. Though he was the only one who had a job, he was not so proud of it, but he was proud of being able to help his family by sending them money. That serenity was achieved by the man even when his family disappointed him more than once. This characteristic in his stories, which he acquired in no more than a decade, made people see his stories differently and attracted young writers to follow in Carver’s steps.

Carver never stopped talking about the marginalized people, but the people were the protagonists of all his stories. Even the great and famous Russian writer, Chekhov, who was an important and admired figure in his career, had peasant blood in his veins. Ordinary people made of Carver an extraordinary writer because of the way he



described every situation, his tone of voice, his style, and the power of his mind to create fiction. Though we have emphasized the change of attitude the characters achieved, “still, there is vast unhappiness in them; they don’t get the little they want.” (Weber) There was not a happy-forever ending, but one that human beings would reach in real life. Little things, no matter what, were enough to initiate a positive attitude in a person that had suffered a lot. In his review, Weber added that “Carver’s people ended up being deserted by common satisfaction, and the stories are moral, really, explaining why decent men and women, dealt crummy circumstances in a plentiful world, behave badly in their intimate battles with selfishness,” battles that were finally won, just like Carver’s battle to overcome his drinking problem.

Since Carver’s first collection appeared, “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” he had grown a lot as a writer and as a person. There is no more doubt about this. And the way he was able to come out of the bottom and get so high to the top is something that not everybody is able to do. Another person would have just given up and died long before Carver did. But this quiet and shy writer could go beyond his limits and get more success than he expected. All his dreams were accomplished in a manner he never thought he would. “I really don’t feel that anything happened in my life until I was 20 and married and had the kids,” Carver had written. (Weber) But once he turned 21, the long and difficult road to the top started for him, and even today, people among critics, readers, and students are trying to explain every aspect that contributed to the creation of a master in the literary field.



2.3.3 Other works

In addition to the collections and the compilation that we have reviewed and analyzed in this investigation, Carver had published a lot of other works and stories during his writing career. Some stories were even published after Carver's death. For example, when Tess Gallagher examined her husband's desk, she found the manuscripts of three stories that were never published. Those stories were "Kindling," "Dreams" and "Vandals," and they appeared in 1998. Other collections that appeared after Carver's include stories that had not been included in his major collection.

In fiction, Carver had the following published works; this list also includes the books published by other people:

"Put Yourself in My Shoes," 1974

"Will you Please Be Quiet, Please?," 1976

"Furious Seasons and Other Stories," 1977

"What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," 1981

"The Pheasant," 1982

"Cathedral," 1983

"If It Please You," 1984

"The Stories of Raymond Carver," 1985

"My Father's Life," 1986

"Those Days: Early Writings by Raymond Carver," 1987

"Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories," 1988

"Elephant and Other Stories," 1988



“Call If You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Other Prose,” 2001

As we have said, the last one includes Carver’s stories that did not appear in any of the official collections written by him. So some of Carver’s followers decided to compile what he had left out in the other collections.

Many of his works were unofficially published, since Carver had died when some of them appeared. Here are included collections of short stories, essays, and other fictional works that he published during his writing career, including writings published in newspapers, magazines, and other media.

In addition, Carver was a poet himself, and had published many collections of poems, too. When he was asked if he considered himself as good a poet as a short-story writer, Carver answered that “my stories are better known, but, myself, I love my poetry.” (Stull) Moreover, he laughed when he said that his poems and short stories “are both short,” and the truth is that he was as great at writing poems as he was at writing short stories, but, as he said, his stories are better known and recognized. Most people identify him as Carver, the story writer, and not as the great American poet.

He added that he wrote poems and short stories in the same way, “and I’d say the effects are similar. There’s a comprehension of language, of emotion, that isn’t to be found in the novel.” (Stull) Therefore, that can be identified as one of the reasons why he never wrote a novel in his writing career. About this topic, he concluded declaring that “the short story and the poem, I’ve often said, are closer to each other than the short story and the novel.” (Stull) That is why it was easy for him to write poems and short stories at the same time, because they are close to each other. And novels, it is not easy to say what would have been his style to write them, since he never wrote one.



Carver's production of poems was also very wide though not very known. The following are the works about poetry that Carver had published:

"Near Klamath," 1968

"Winter Insomnia," 1970

"At Night The Salmon Move," 1976

"Fires," 1983

"Where Water Comes Together With Other Water," 1985

"Ultramarine," 1986

"A New Path To The Waterfall," 1989

"In a Marine Light: Selected Poems," 1988

"All of Us: The Collected Poems," 1996

In all this books, Carver collected his best poems. The last two books are compilations of poems that appeared in the previous books.

All in all, Carver's contribution to American literature has been enormous, considering that he had only 50 years of life, and his career consisted of only 25 years in comparison to other writers that have written as much books and stories as Carver, and they had had more time to do it. People who met him, his readers, the ones who got influenced by him, and we will never let those pieces of literature created by Carver die.



CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Basic Methodology

Basically, the method we have used in the analysis of Carver's short works is the Analytic-Synthetic method. This is one of the most effective methods to be used in a bibliographic investigation because of the combination of the two methods – the Analytic and the Synthetic.

At the beginning of the analysis, we have separated Carver's whole life in order to understand his short stories better. That is why we started by analyzing Carver's life, and all the important elements in it, with the help of the Analytic method. This division involved Carver's personal life and writing career into all the components that had influenced his stories. Those elements were his early life, his writing career including his academic preparation, his influences, and his writing procedures. Additionally, we analyzed his marriages and death. That is how we found out that a great percentage of his life was reflected in his work. For instance, poverty, alcoholism, and broken relationships are found both in his life and stories. These are just a few evidences of the impact of his own experience on his work. Therefore, with the analytic method, these issues were clarified in the investigation.

Then the Synthetic method helped us to put the parts of the analysis together to analyze and understand the stories in his four major collections. It was clear for us that the works he had written were a consequence of his life and other stimuli that appeared in his career. In other words, it became easier to study Carver's short stories by



understanding the different factors that he had to go through and which made this writer as great as he was. That was how his family, his addictions, his inspirations, his desires, his fears, and his new life all converged to make up what we know as Carver's work.

Likewise, we know that literary writings, like the ones created by Carver, affect mainly the emotions of people who get involved in them. The stories in famous writings are nearly always involved with the feelings and emotions of the writer, and they are transmitted to the reader through words. Therefore, a "qualitative" analysis really helped in the investigation. The influence of Carver's works was great, and thence he succeeded in getting people's attention. So what we will do next is to analyze qualitatively these effects on other writers of the 20th century and of our time.

The qualitative impact that Carver's readers suffered is considerably big. This is because the stories had affected not only in their knowledge about how a story is to be written, but mainly their emotions. Many of Carver's contemporaries and other young writers of our time have been captivated by the way Carver wrote his stories and by the themes he used in them. Therefore, in the following pages, we will talk about the influence that Carver had on those writers that had the opportunity to meet him, and on others who have read his work.

3.2 Impact and Influence of Carver's Work on Other Writers

At this last stage in the investigation, we will consider how Carver's work has influenced a lot of young writers, who saw in him and his stories the opportunity to improve their own works.



The great influence Carver had over other writers is also one of the principal objectives of this investigation, so we will consider the opinion of many critics and authors that have seen this influence clearer than anybody else.

First of all, Bruce Weber wrote in The New York Times Book Review that “the influence of Carver’s skillful, quiet voice is being felt by a generation of still unpublished writers. According to Tom Jenks, who edits fiction at Esquire, ‘The style most often attempted by young writers is one marked by short, hard-edged sentences, like those of Ray Carver, and the subject matter often brushes up against Carver’s as well - representative of what I would call a downside neo-realism.’” (Weber) According to this critique, not only well-known writers have adopted many of Carver’s features when writing, but also many other young writers of our time whose works have not been published yet. Therefore, a lot of similarities can be found in Carver’s and other young writers’ works. The number of people influenced by Carver has increased, since his work is still being emulated by lots of new writers, nowadays.

Additionally, Carver’s themes of despair and hopelessness, reflected in his own life, have been considered controversial among his critics. However, “for many young writers, it was terribly liberating.” (McInerney) That is why these writers were attracted to choose controversial themes to talk about in the stories. The themes that Carver once wrote about were greatly accepted among his followers.

For this reason, in the same way important writers influenced Carver’s work, he became very influential on other writers when his popularity increased. Among the authors having importance in American Literature whose works have had something to do with Carver’s, we have Jay McInerney, Robert Altman, Richard Ford, Per Petterson,



Tobias Wolff, Jayne Anne Phillips, Tess Gallagher, Mona Simpson, Haruki Murakami, Tom Perrotta, J. Jill Robinson, and many others. These are just a few names we have found while studying Carver's career. Of course, this list of writers is a lot longer, and this is increasing little by little once young writers get captivated by the way Carver wrote his masterpieces, since he is so contemporary.

Since Carver was a teacher during a great part of his life, he could share his knowledge in the classrooms, and many writers that now are famous were his students. Carver himself had learned many important features to become an excellent writer from his teachers, like John Gardner, Dick Day, and others. In addition to his creative writing classes, Carver had to teach English courses, so there was a possibility for other writers to learn from him the art of writing. Ray also shared teaching with famous story writers, so they had the opportunity to influence one another.

First of all, the novelist Jay McInerney, who learned from Carver himself this art, has acquired many characteristics of the great author that helped him to write his novels. Though it is true that short stories and novels have some differences, lots of things make these kinds of writings interact one with the other. Carver himself had acquired some writing features to write short stories from renowned novelists, and his short stories had inspired a lot of other writers, novelists included.

In his book review, McInerney wrote, "in the late 1970's and early 80's, no other writer was as much discussed and mimicked by the writers one met at readings and writers' conferences." (McInerney) The period McInerney referred to is remembered as the date in which Carver began gaining fame and recognition in the literary world. People in this world wanted to hear and know more about the author that was writing



amazing tales. They became interested in his stories, and when they read them, they understood why he was being compared with the greatest writers. Thus McInerney said he was lucky to meet the writer everybody was talking about at that time, and later to become his student at Syracuse University in the early 80's.

In the classroom, the quiet Carver had a hard time facing his stage-fright in front of students who were eager to learn from a master. That was surely not a good experience for Carver. About this experience, McInerney added that teaching "was something he did out of necessity, a role he was uncomfortable with. He did it to make a living, because it was easier than the other jobs he'd had [...] he was very shy. The idea of facing a class made him nervous every time. On the days he had to teach he would get agitated, as if he himself were a student on the day of the final exam." (McInerney) Eventually, Carver quitted teaching, but not before giving many students the tools they needed to improve their writings and that helped them to write better. That was the way young writers got influenced by Carver and the authors he used to read, who were similar to him.

When asked more about his experience as Carver's student, McInerney said he learned a lot from his teacher:

It was a lot about choosing the right words. I remember one time he told me, "Why is it earth when you mean dirt? He was about consciousness of language. He would go over your manuscripts with a red pencil, marking, questioning. I don't actually think he enjoyed it; he dumped teaching as soon as he could. He wasn't so great in a classroom situation, but he was terrific one-on-one. (Eyman)



This usage of “earth” was also discussed by Jay in his book review. It was important to Carver to teach his student to use the words properly. In an essay Carver wrote about his mentor, John Gardner, he discussed the importance to write accurately. He wrote “Ground is ground, he’d say, it means ground, dirt, that kind of stuff. But if you say ‘earth,’ that’s something else, that word has other ramifications.” (McInerney) Like McInerney, Carver’s students learned to be very careful when writing. Jay added that the real teaching was at his office, where he used to spend prolonged periods of time discussing every student’s manuscripts.

In addition, Carver encouraged his students to write and write better every time, but “mostly, he encouraged us to read...” said Jay. (Eyman) He let his own influences have an effect on his students though they said those people did not write like Carver. The majority of what his students learned came from Carver and his stories. Because of that Jay McInerney emphasized that his style was shaped by his teacher at Syracuse.

In this way, Jay acquired small but important elements to keep in mind when writing. Those were important features that later would make of him an excellent writer of fiction. Not many young writers of that time had the chance to be influenced by Carver himself, but most of them did it by reading his work, and that is why Jay was lucky to have had such a teacher.

Another important person influenced by Carver’s work was Robert Altman. He was an American director and screenwriter that became known for his highly naturalistic films having a stylized perspective. At any rate, that is how critics qualified his work. Altman is important to mention because he directed “Short Cuts” in 1993, which consisted of an ambitious adaptation of several short stories by Raymond Carver. The



great writer's stories were perfect for Altman's films because they portrayed the lives of various citizens of Los Angeles and other western cities in the 70s and 80s. "Short Cuts" was recognized with numerous awards, including the Independent Spirit Award for Best Film, the Independent Spirit Award for Best Screenplay, the Bodil Award for Best American Film, the Boston Society of Film Critics Award for Best Screenplay, the Italian National Syndicate of Film Journalists Award for Best Foreign Director, and the Golden Lion. This project was also nominated to other awards such as the Academy Award for Directing, the Golden Globe Award for Best Screenplay, and the César Award for Best Foreign Film. That was certainly a great recognition for Altman, and Carver's work was what made that possible. Furthermore, those are just a few prizes he was able to win for his works during his productive career.

The third person Carver and his short stories have influenced is Per Petterson, "one of Norway's best living storytellers." (Greene) He has written novels and short stories, and lists Raymond Carver as his great influencer, as a result, there are many features that are similar in their works. For example, one of his famous books, "Out Stealing Horses," "is full of incident, from the shocking shooting death of a child to a man abandoning his wife and children." (Greene) That kind of situations are something readers can find in Carver's work, too, and that particular event is something Carver would have written in his stories. Of course, that happening was not a coincidence. Petterson's "focus on character may be the result of his literary influences, foremost among which he lists Raymond Carver, the great American short-story writer." (Greene) About this, Petterson added that "when I started reading Raymond Carver around 1980,



it was like coming home;” obviously, he felt identified, like many other readers, with the characters in Carver’s stories, and that was what he wanted to write about.

Besides, Petterson’s books have gained great recognition in his country. “Out Stealing Horses” was awarded the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2006 and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award²⁵ in 2007. The rest of his books have also been awarded with prestigious prizes in Norway and other countries. Among other American writers Petterson has read, we have Richard Ford and Jayne Anne Phillips. They also helped to shape his style, and, of course, their themes are also similar.

Per Petterson is a famous writer in the literary world, not only in his country, but also in many others. That is why his stories have been translated into almost 50 languages around the world. Therefore, Carver’s stories were more than just a medium to entertain, but also a medium to learn, and his stories have influenced and created prestigious authors around the world.

Carver’s stories have also influenced Tobias Wolff’s work. Tobias Wolff is known for his memoirs, especially “This Boy’s Life” published in 1989, which describes his adolescence as he wanders the United States with his mother. Wolff also is the author of many short stories and novels. Like Jay McInerney, Wolff was also directly influenced by Carver, since he worked with him at Syracuse University in New York. At Syracuse, a considerable number of authors had studied at that time, for example, Jay McInerney, who we are already acquainted with, and Tom Perrotta, another important writer we will talk about below.

²⁵ The International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award obtained by Petterson was the world’s largest monetary literary prize for a single work of fiction published in English, consisting of €100,000.



Carver, Wolff, and Ford, three writers of that time, have been known as “Dirty Realists” because the themes and tones of their stories are to some degree analogous. They influenced one another, though, despite this fact, everyone had his own and particular characteristics. In the end, the way they tell their stories have a lot of differences. For instance, about Carver, Wolff said “Ray had this certain sound in his stories, which was just him, so brutally his own, you could not begin to duplicate it.” (Adams) Tobias Wolff was able to state this argument because he knew Carver very well. They shared a lot of time teaching at the same university and reading what the other had written. Wolff added that “Ray was competitive, I guess, like all writers, but he also took the teeth out of any rivalry pretty quickly just by being so enthusiastic about the good fortune anyone else had. He was a supreme well-wisher. We both knew enough to know that for anyone to have some success as a writer is an amazing stroke of luck.” (Adams) So both of them were really lucky to have gained a big popularity in the literary world; moreover, they are remembered as the precursors of a style that would take over American literature in the upcoming years.

In the list of people whose works was influenced by Carver, we have the poet Tess Gallagher, his second wife. She was mainly “known for her accessible, intimate poetry,” before she met Carver, but later, she became a short-story writer, too, under her husband’s stimulus. Once Tess starting writing short stories, she was able to collect them in three books of fiction which are “The Lover of Horses,” that appeared in 1987, “At the Owl Woman Saloon,” in 1996, and “The Man From Kinvara” in 2009. These books made her increase her audience of fiction lovers besides the ones who liked her poems. Later, she would write many essays on many topics – one of them about Ray.



Gallagher has published numerous books of poetry, but the most interesting of them, for us, was “Moon Crossing Bridge,” a collection that appeared in 1992. This collection of love poems was written after Carver’s death, and consisted of “sixty poems that centers on the theme of loss and grieving...” inspired by the loss of her love. (Poetry Foundation) Thus, Carver was able to influence a whole book of poetry, though it is depressing to know that the basis of this book was the loss of a great writer.

Moreover, Gallagher, being also an essayist, composed an essay about Carver’s drinking addiction. As we know, the essay was called “Instead of Dying,” that consisted of an adaptation of a speech she gave at the Welsh Academy’s Academic Intoxication Conference in 2006. The written essay appeared in the Sun Magazine²⁶ in the same year. In the essay, it is easy to find a lot of lines like the following ones:

Instead of dying from alcohol, Raymond Carver, chose to live [...] The choice that changed Ray’s life happened on June 2, 1977 and probably ought to be declared one of the more useful holidays: to honor all those who make it out of alcoholism. [...] I think in the end, Ray managed to exchange a deadly intoxication that would have killed him, for one that instead honored his desire for precision and, yes, intoxication with language and storytelling. [...] He considered his having stopped drinking the single most important event of his life. [...] By the time Ray quit drinking, he had been on a long, sad road since his teenage years. [...] Even in sobriety, there were skittery times. [...] During my time with Ray, I learned that there are all degrees and kinds of recoveries from alcohol, some

²⁶ The Sun is a monthly American magazine of essays, interviews, short stories, poems, and photography.



where the desire to drink hits a person like a javelin and it's all they can do, to keep from falling to their knees. (Literature Wales)

All of these lines expressed by Carver's widow highlight what "the line of demarcation" meant for Carver. He stated that he could not be prouder of the day he stopped drinking - June 2, 1977. Moreover, in the essay, we can find Carver's pomes talking about this subject. They are "Gravy," "NyQuil," "Distress Sale," "Jean's TV," "My Daughter and Apple Pie," "Photograph of My Father in His Twenty-Second Year," "Limits," and "Late Fragment," Carver's final poem.

Furthermore, Tess Gallagher gained the right to reprint many of Carver's stories that appeared in "What We Talk about when We Talk about Love." It is known that Ray and Tess had been talking about the severe change that the stories suffered after Gordon Lish edited them²⁷. Thus Ray had told her that, one day, he would publish the stories as they were originally written by him. Carver died before he could do this, and so his widow did it, stimulated by what Carver had told her. She also did it to show that the real master responsible for such great stories was Carver himself, since rumors said Lish was the one who created the stories. That was how "Beginners," the original manuscripts of "What We Talk about" was published in 2009. Tess said that with the publication of those stories, she has "pushed the reset button on understanding Ray, what he cared about in his writing, his tone, his care for his characters." (Poetry Foundation) However, others think that "the publication of 'Beginners' has not done Carver any favor. Rather, it has inadvertently pointed up the editorial genius of Gordon Lish." (Tomlinson) Apparently, they have forgotten the real genius behind the stories in

²⁷ Above, we were able to appreciate how much Carver's stories changed after Lish's edition.



“Beginners” and “What We Talk about” was Carver, since all the stories were written by the same person. Despite everything, the debate about this topic will go on, and every reader can get his own conclusion. In the end, what readers really want is being entertained with a good story. They do not care about who had contributed to write a story as long as this is something worthy to read.

As we previously have said, Gallagher also contributed to the publication of three of Carver’s unpublished stories, “Kindling,” “Dreams” and “Vandals,” in 1998. These stories were found in his desk at the house in Port Angeles among “lots of scraps and other ephemera.” (Stamler) She asked for Esquire editor, Jay Woodruff’s help to go through Carver’s desk to find something to commemorate “the 10th anniversary of his death.” (Stamler) The stories were good and only needed little editing, and so, Tess tried to keep Ray in the memory of people. Finally, we can summarize all we have said about Gallagher by stating that she was able to write poems, essays, and short stories under Carver’s influence, and because of that, her popularity was benefited. And since the great author was also a poet himself, it is true that Gallagher’s poetry was also influenced.

The next writer we will take into consideration is Haruki Murakami, a Japanese novelist, short-story writer, and translator. His work is important for he has translated many English works into Japanese, including Carver’s stories.

His extent bibliography consists of a great number of novels and short stories that had gained critical acclaim around the world, for those works have also been translated into almost 50 languages. For that reason, Murakami’s work was very influential in many countries around the world. Most of that work has received



prestigious literary prizes, and The Guardian Magazine recognized Murakami “among the world’s greatest living novelists.” (Poole) This is a label given to few authors in history.

Since Murakami was a translator himself, he created the Japanese version of stories of American authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Carver, Truman Capote, and John Irving. Moreover, his book “What We Talk about when We Talk about Running” published in 2007 in Japan, contains stories about his experiences as a marathon runner and a triathlete. The name of the book is a play on Carver’s collection “What We Talk about when We Talk about Love.” Because of Murakami’s work as translator, the great Carver became widely read on the eastern part of the globe.

One more writer influenced by Carver is Tom Perrotta, an American novelist. He also wrote many short stories in his early years as writer. His first published book was a collection of short stories named “Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies.” Moreover, in a conversation with many people about Perrotta’s work, Christine Apodaca, from Boston, Massachusetts, asked him about his early influences. Part of his answer was that “...I can see Carver’s influence quite clearly in my first book ‘Bad Haircut,’ though it’s less apparent in my last couple of books. On the other hand, I don’t think I could’ve written the ending of ‘Little Children’ if I hadn’t read stories like ‘A Small, Good Thing.’” (Post Road Magazine) Therefore, Carver’s influence on Perrotta was considerably big since the collection “Bad Haircut” and the novel “Little Children” are part of his most renowned works, and what made him gain a lot of recognition in the literary world. Though “A Small Good Thing” has a relatively good ending, the story itself is involved with death. However, there are positive aspects that make of this an excellent story, the couple



accepting the loss of a loved one and the warmth given by a stranger, for example. Now we realize the magnitude and the importance of stories like this one in Carver's career. This influence was basically in content. Carver's themes had been long discussed by many critics, but for young writers, those themes were liberating.

Besides, we know that Carver's and other writers' works of the seventies and eighties had been grouped in the same American traditions. Sometimes their fiction was given the name of "Dirty Realism" because of the controversial themes they discussed in their stories. Therefore, Perrotta is another writer that can be included in this group, since he also used depressing themes in his stories. In his novel "Little Children," Perrotta's most acclaimed novels, he had done just what these writers would have done. "Families, in the view of Perrotta's men and women, are misbegotten alliances, hothouses of boredom, [and] nurseries of disappointment. Every spouse in the novel dreams of escape - though it's usually an end around into a new domestic arrangement that will doubtless prove unequal to his or her desperate hopes of starting over." (Blythe) Certainly, a lot of that can be found in Carver's and other writers' stories of that time, too, because of their influence. Additionally, because of this work, Perrotta was called "an American Chekhov whose characters even at their most ridiculous seem blessed and ennobled by a luminous human aura..." (Blythe) and that is why he had placed himself in the same "plain-language American tradition" of Hemingway and Carver, for example. (Shanahan)

The last writer we will discuss as being influenced by Carver is J. Jill Robinson, a Canadian writer, editor, and teacher. We consider it important to talk about her, since she is a writer of our days; therefore, she can be used as an example of how Carver's



stories are still influencing many writers in the present days. She is the author of a novel, "More In Anger," that was published in 2012. Moreover, she wrote four collections of short stories, "Saltwater Trees" that contains 13 stories and was published in 1991, "Lovely In Her Bones" that contains 11 stories, published in 1993, "Eggplant Wife" in 1995, and "Residual Desire" published in 2003. Carver appeared as one of her main influences and inspirations. She said she likes "the way Carver writes dialogue, the spareness, so that when he's writing about something painful, it can make you wince at how naked it is." The most obvious similarity between Carver's work and hers is that they wrote heart-wrecking stories. Certainly, that is what Carver and the people he influenced have in common.

The authors mentioned above represent just a small part of the whole group of writers that were moved by Carver's short stories. Novelists, short story writers, poets, journalists, critics, and many other people have recognized that Carver's work is the most impressive, perfect, and influential author since Hemingway. Others, on the other hand, just say he is the greatest American writer of any time. His many award-winning stories and collections are still being analyzed and used as examples to follow for many young writers.

To cut a long story short, it can be said that when the great American short-story writer left this world, his fame increased even more than when he was alive. His work became widely read in many countries, and because of that, this has been translated into about 20 languages. In a short fragment taken from a literature book published in 1998, we summarize what we have said:



...as soon as he was gone, he seemed to be everywhere, not only here in the Northwest, or in America, but already translated into twenty other languages. Now, ten years later, almost as many volumes of his works have appeared posthumously as were published during his lifetime. Critical acclaim for his work - his poetry as well as his short fiction - already marked at the time of his death, has been massive in the interim. Carver is judged the most important American short story writer of the 1980s; he is also considered one of our country's greatest writers of short fiction and remains, as he was first dubbed in The London Times, "America's Chekhov." (Henry)

What Carver had done will never be forgotten for many writers of his style. "In the 1980's, Ray brought the short story out from under the shadow of the novel," giving short fiction a prestigious position in America. (Henry) Though there were also many other writers that contributed to make it possible, Carver was indisputably in the middle of everything.

Writers of our time are choosing to write short stories instead of novels because they require much less effort. In many cases, their reasons to write short stories are the same Carver had – that is getting instantaneous benefits from their works.

Because of Carver's greatness, a contest for short story writers was founded. This is known as "The Raymond Carver Short Story Contest." This is internationally renowned and has awarded prizes to writers around the globe. Some writers found in this contest the opportunity to get known and to share his stories. In some cases, the first place prizewinning story is the author's first-ever fiction publication. That is something that attracts even more participants year after year. And that is something



significant that people have done for Carver's memory. So, to conclude, Carver was, is, and will be an author to keep in mind when looking for a good story to read, when trying to write a story, and when talking about the greatest authors in history.



CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

Once we have arrived at the end of this investigation about Raymond Carver's short stories, it is possible to truthfully state that Raymond Carver is one of the best American storytellers in history because of his amazing work. His work has been so really influential that we could find and cite many important authors affirming that. According to our investigation, moreover, that is something that we ourselves could appreciate. We were able to understand why and how he wrote his stories, daring to go to limits that few had the nerve to go to. Though it was his indisputable talent to write stories that made people be interested in them, his themes talking about the working classes received the recognition that none thought stories like that would get.

In our investigation, it was important to stress Carver's life because it was really influential in his stories. Besides, the stories somehow expressed what Carver felt when he wrote each of them. That is why the stories in his first life are depressing, and the stories written in his second life are more optimistic. In his first years as writer, he could have given up to his problems because of his addictions, but he was able to succeed. Also, he could solve his misfortunes with his family, like his poverty, and that is something expressed in his fiction.

Throughout our investigation, it was not easy to find information about Carver, which was disappointing, considering his importance. The major part of what we have found about him comes from electronic resources. This helped us a great deal to



achieve our goal of letting him into our lives and emotions. Therefore, the importance of digital data in academic projects is substantial. But it is also necessary to have a physical resource to examine in order to get information, and that is why this analysis was intended. And also, we wanted to take an author like Raymond Carver into our environment.

We would like the readers of this thesis to remember that Carver came from a world having plenty of misery, and despite this fact, he was able to succeed and get as much recognition as the greatest writers in history. It looks like anybody can do that, from this point of view, but Carver's best quality was fighting until the last day of his life and never giving up to difficulties. Because of that, he won the right to have another opportunity to live a new life. What is more, his gift to write and his imagination helped him to create real masterpieces admired by thousands of people around the world. Those stories would finally become an inspiration for potential writers.

Therefore, with this investigation, we expect to solve the problem we propose for this research. Now, literature students and any person from Cuenca have a physical resource to draw upon when looking for information about Raymond Carver, the short-story writer. Moreover, other problems presented when examining his work have been analyzed and clarified, for example, his style, themes of discussion, influences, and the people he influenced. Anyone can create his own analysis and opinions by having this thesis and its arguments to support these themes of conversation.

Finally, Raymond Carver, as the author of many collections of short stories, will be honored and criticized, but for us, he will be taken as an example to follow not only when writing, but also when facing life. Those collections are not only literary works, for



us, they are the best gift he could have given to all of us for he lived to write and died having still so much to offer us.

4.2 Recommendations

- When reading any of Carver's stories, keep in mind some elements of his biography to understand why his stories are different in content in certain periods of his life, and also to comprehend why he wrote about the topic being discussed.
- Not all that Carver wrote is autobiographical. His stories have a lot of imagination, so use your own imagination when reading his stories.
- The endings of Carver's stories are, in some cases, enigmatic, so complete concentration needs to be applied when reading.
- When we discussed Carver's writing procedures, we were based on his own explanation of how he used to write, so, as not everybody has the same habits to write, keep in mind that there must be more or fewer steps when talking about another writer's writing procedures.
- Remember that one of the advantages of writing it to express in words what one feels and wants freely, so the writing procedures have to be used as patterns to follow, and not as rules that have to be obeyed all the time.
- The storyline synopses are just summaries of the most important events of each story, so read the complete stories to obtain specific information.
- In Carver's compilation "Where I'm Calling From," it is possible to clearly see how his writing habits changed, so pay attention to the length of the stories and the content.



- Look for specific information if more details about the topics mentioned in this investigation are needed.
- Writers mentioned as Carver's influences represent just the most important and relevant in his career, since there are many other writers who have influenced his work.
- Writers mentioned as people influenced by Carver are also only the most relevant. There are many other authors who have become famous following Carver's steps, and others that are still unpublished have also been influenced by the American short-story writer.
- To read prose like Carver's, take into consideration the other authors mentioned in this investigation, since a great deal of their works are alike.
- Carver's poetry is also important in American literature, so the books of poems that we mentioned in Carver's other works are also worthy to read.
- To go deeper in Carver's life, we recommend reading his biography written by Carol Sklenicka named "Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life," since her thorough investigation goes beyond any other.
- The interviews that appeared in the Paris Review and the book titled "Conversations with Raymond Carver" written by Marshall B. Gentry and William Stull are also good resources to understand more about Carver's life and work from himself.
- Check the works cited in the investigation for further information.
- The Spanish version of the interview carried out by Mona Simpson for the Paris Review can be found in C. E. Feiling's book, "Confesiones de Escritores," located



in the Centro de Documentación Juan Bautista Vazquez of the University of Cuenca.



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