

**Sinking the Titanic:  
The Iceberg and its Minimalist Implications  
In Raymond Carver's Fiction**

Senior Paper

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When Raymond Carver died in 1988 of lung cancer, Robert Gottlieb, the then editor of *The New Yorker*, stated, "America just lost the writer it could least afford to lose" (Max 36). In Carver's mere twenty-year publishing career, he garnered such titles as "the American Chekhov" (*London Times*), "the most imitated American writer since Hemingway" (Nesset 2), and "as successful as a short story writer in America can be" (Meyer 239). Carver's stories won the O. Henry Award three consecutive years, he was nominated for the National Book Award in 1977 for Will You Please Be Quiet Please?. won two NBA awards for fiction, received a Guggenheim Fellowship as well as the "Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters" (Saltzman 3), and his collection of stories, Cathedral was nominated for both National Book Critics Circle award and a Pulitzer Prize (Saltzman 3).

Born in Oregon in 1938, Carver grew up in Yakima, Washington where his father worked in the sawmill. At twenty years old, Carver was married to his high school sweetheart, Maryanne, and had two children (Saltzman 1). Plagued by debt and escalating alcoholism, the Carvers moved to California where Raymond "worked a series of low-paying jobs, including deliveryman, gas station attendant and hospital janitor, while his wife waited tables and sold door to door" (1), his jobs also included "sawmill worker.. .apartment manager, stock boy, hotel desk clerk, seller of theater programs, and tulip picker" (Bethea 1). Carver was born into and lived the lower-class lifestyle of the characters in his fiction.

Carver's life circumstances not only appeared in his short fiction, as "Carver mines the rich, passionate, confusing, hurtful experience throughout his career"

(Bethea 2), but also necessitated its form. Working what Carver, himself, called "crap jobs" (Nesset 1) and trying to raise a family in his early twenties did not leave room for the writing of a novel: "There was no way I could undertake a novel, a two-or-three-year stretch of work on a single project. I needed to write something I could get some kind of a payoff from immediately... Hence, poems and short stories" (Gentry, Stull 37).

While Carver is read primarily as a short story writer, he was also a prolific poet. In his brief published career, "he published ten books of poetry and prose, as well as numerous chapbooks and limited editions" (Nesset 1). While his poetry constitutes a large body of his work, perhaps in volume larger than his fiction, Carver was "first and last, a fiction writer" (Scott 54), and is remembered as one. His short stories have always overshadowed his poetry.

Raymond Carver's three major fiction collections Will You Please Be Quiet Please? (1976), What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (1981), and Cathedral (1983) turned the American literary landscape on its ear. His brand of "new fiction", as it came to be called, immediately divided critics, and, in their attempts to classify, spawned innumerable literary terminologies. These terminologies include: *K-Mart Realism*, *Hick Chic*, *Freeze-Dried Fiction*, *TV Fiction*, *Hi-Tech Fiction*, *Post-Literate Literature*, *White Trash Fiction*, *Postalcoholic Blue-collar Minimalist Hyperrealism*, *Around-the-house-and-in-the-yard Fiction*, *Coke Fiction*, *Catatonic Realism*, and *Postmodernist Blue-Collar Neo-Early-Hemingwayism* (Saltzman 5). Carver's fiction, for once, it seems, inspired literary critics to creativity. Other critics, perhaps less creative, have pinned Carver with more realistic terms: 'Photorealism', 'Hyperrealism', 'Post-Modern Modernism', and 'Dirty Realism'.

While these terms have all been applied to Carver, there is one term that has stuck, which has become pervasive within Carver criticism and has excited more controversy than all other terms combined: 'minimalism'. This seemingly small, slight term carries so much weight in Carver criticism, has created such controversy amongst critics, that in the majority of its appearances it is marked with quotations (Hallett ix). Carver, himself, disliked the term and did not consider himself minimalist: "I don't like it. There's something about 'minimalist' that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don't like," (Gentry, Stull 44) and Carver goes further in stating, "It's true that I try to eliminate every unnecessary detail in my story and try to cut my words to the bone. But that doesn't make me a minimalist" (80). However, the 'elimination' Carver speaks of here, 'smacks' of a minimalist technique. As well, in his essay "On Writing", Carver states, "What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things" (Carver, Fires 17). This 'leaving out' and 'landscape under the surface' speaks directly to Ernest Hemingway's likening of the story to an iceberg:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (Hemingway 192)

This "iceberg" model has minimalist implications and can be used to show elements of tension that lie beneath the surface of Carver's fiction.

While we are challenged to find a piece of Carver criticism which does not at least mention minimalism, and with Carver being called the "father of minimalism," (Hallett 5) and "the chief practitioner of what's been called 'American Minimalism'" (Meyer 239); it seems curious that we are just as challenged in finding a clear definition of this term as well as specific aspects of Carver's work which have been critically determined minimalist. Thus, it is pertinent to briefly examine what defines literary minimalism and to explore minimalist techniques in Carver's fiction.

In regards to Raymond Carver, and the critical conversation in general, minimalism is an ambiguous term often times regarded as "one of those disreputable literary terms that one dare not use without placing it within quotation marks or prefacing it with 'so-called'" (Hallett ix). Adam Meyer, in his article "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism", states that "Much of the debate about Carver's merits centers around a similar debate about minimalism... [and] Much of the controversy is sparked by a confusion of terminology" (239). Critics are apt to use it completely unsparingly, and often times negatively, in regards to Carver's fiction, as Michael Trussler states: "repeatedly, however, the term [minimalist] is used pejoratively, a rapid dismissal of an artwork, often made more on moral and stylistic grounds" (23). However, rather than make a moral judgment as to either "Carver's merits" or minimalism, what is more pertinent is to clarify this "confusion of terminology," and to examine minimalist techniques in Carver's fiction, as Arthur Bethea states: "the application of *minimalism* [his italics] to Carver's

work depends on the definition of this protean term" (Bethea 5). As there is no established definition of minimalism, a look at several reputed ones is necessary.

In his article "The Post-Minimalist American Short Story or what Comes After Carver" Dan Pope describes minimalism as "the writer's fondness for the present tense and their concurrent disregard for background or historical explication.. .the unresolved situations and the characters' vague sense of emptiness and disillusionment" (333). John Barth sheds light on the term in his article "A Few Words About Minimalism". Barth states "Old or new fiction can be minimalist in any or all of several ways" (2), and defines minimalism as: "terse, oblique, realistic, or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction" (1). Barth then describes the several ways a work of literature may be deemed minimalist:

There are minimalisms of unit, form and scale: short words, short sentences and paragraphs, super short stories.. .There are minimalisms of style: a stripped-down vocabulary; a stripped-down syntax that avoids periodic sentences.. .and there are minimalisms of material: minimal characters minimal exposition" . (Barth 2)

While John Barth shows more initiative than most critics in at least attempting to define and give examples of minimalism, his "cool-surfaced" definition is perhaps 'protean', and leaves us with less than a strong grasp of minimalism.

Roland Sadowsky, in "The Minimalist Short Story: its Definition, Writers, and (small) Heyday", refers to Kim Herzinger's definition of minimalism: "work loosely characterized by equanimity of surface, 'ordinary' subjects, recalcitrant narrators and

deadpan narratives, slightness of story, and characters who don't think out loud" (qtd. 530). While these critics do give us an idea of minimalist fiction, their definitions are diverse, Barth describing minimalism in terms of form and Herzinger more character-based, and they prove Michael Trussler's point that "Literary minimalism appears to be somewhat protean in its manifestations" (24).

In order to gain a better understanding of this 'protean' term, we must turn to Cynthia Whitney Hallett's book Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver. Amy Hempel, and Mary Robinson. This work gives us a deeper view of literary minimalism, both offering a definition and examples, and tracing its origins. In it, Hallett tells us that "Minimalism was first recognized as an artistic movement in the 1960's" (1), but continues in asserting that there is a definite dissimilarity in minimalist art and minimalist literature:

the tendencies with minimalism in the visual artists are to avoid any implications or meaning beyond the subject/object itself.. .whereas the tendency in literature is to evoke within a minimal frame some larger issues by means of figurative associations. (Hallett 1)

This definition gives us a more firm understanding of the term and is congruent with Hemingway's iceberg model. Hallett further reflects minimalist aspects of the iceberg model in her statement: "Generally, minimalist writers appear to generate as much story with as little text as possible" (2). This idea speaks directly to the iceberg model of the short story, and is in congruence with Carver's fiction as well: the tip of the iceberg is the text, the actual narration, but the tension lies, in Carver's words: 'just below

the surface of things'. Hallett seems to respond directly to the Carver quote: "What creates tension in a piece of fiction... [is] also the things that are left out, that are implied" (Carver, Fires 17), by stating that this exclusion is a minimalist technique: "minimalist writers of short stories employ an aesthetic of exclusion" (Hallett 7).

In so far as the reading of minimalist fiction goes, Hallett asserts that we must "infer from the part exposed what exactly has been omitted" (9). Frederick Barthelme, a "convicted minimalist" writer, goes further by stating that readers of minimalist literature must "hear the whispers, catch the feints and shadows, gather the traces, sense the pressures" (26) in order to understand the "iceberg" below the surface of the narration. It is Hallett's contention that in minimalist fiction, Carver's especially, what is excluded becomes as important or more so than what is included (50). With an understanding of literary minimalism, we may now go forth into Carver's fiction looking for the omitted, the "iceberg" below the surface of the narrative: a technique which we can now see having minimalist implications.

"Why Don't You Dance," the first story in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, gives us a quintessential example of the unsaid in Carver's fiction, the "iceberg" which lurks below the surface of the story. As Arthur Bethea states, this story "contains a series of small omissions yet is not nearly as indeterminate as it might initially appear" (105). "Why Don't You Dance," begins with a man as he "poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard" (Carver, Love 3). We are told, "That morning he had cleared out the closets, and except for the three cartons in the living room, all the stuff was out of the house" (4). While this man is away at the store, a young couple happens by and assumes the man's front lawn to be a yard sale. We are told



that this young couple is furnishing a new apartment. The man returns with a sack-full of beer and whiskey, offers them a drink, and they proceed to barter over prices of the items in the lawn. The three continue to barter, and as they become intoxicated, the man invites the young couple to dance.

The story concludes with the young girl recounting the story to a friend: "The guy was about middle-aged. All his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my God. Don't laugh" (9). The last line of the story tells us: "She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying" (10).

There is most certainly "more to it", and the young girl's quote nearly mirrors Hallett's statement that "the [minimalist] method of presentation suggests that there is more to the story than the mere external narrated details" (7). When the story is examined closely, with an eye for the sub-narrative details, we understand that there is more to the story than simply one man's bizarre yard sale.

A 'submerged' aspect that is immediately pertinent to the story is the domestic and emotional state of the man. We are immediately aware that something is certainly awry, that there is some sort of unspoken tension here, since moving one's furnishings out onto the front lawn certainly indicates a questionable mental state. We are "hooked by this bizarre situation, [and] we want to know what caused the man to put all his furnishings outside" (Bethea 105). However, we can only assume what has motivated the man to do such a thing, as we are not directly given this information in the story's narration.

We can assume that the man has recently broken up with his wife or partner. In the first paragraph of the story, the man looks out the window at all of his furnishings and notes everything is the same as it was inside: "nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, nightstand and reading lamp on her side. His side, her side" (Carver, Love 3). While each side is represented in the furniture, only his side is represented in the story. "Her side" of the story we are never told, and while "the entire allusion to her, vague and disconnected, is buried in the husband's observation" (Hallett 51); her presence permeates the story and is suggested through the behavior of the man.

With two words "her side" we are given that there was a woman involved in this story, and these two words are but the tip of the iceberg. We can assume that she is no longer around as the man's behavior is not the typical behavior exhibited by one who is in a relationship. What these two words show us, as well, is that there was a division in their relationship, that there were sides that were not crossed, "His side, her side," which indicates a separation of sorts. This description of sides is referring to sides of the bed and is poignant as a display of the couple's possible lacking romantic relationship, that each maintained their own sides in the bed and that this lack of romance may have been a factor in their eventual breakup (Bethea 106).

With this reading, we see the man's redecoration of his yard as an "inversion of his home [which] imitates the reversal of his fortunes... the self's going-out-of-business sale, a systematic exteriorization of old wounds" (Saltzman 101). As well, this bizarre re-decoration, as Nessett observes, is a "kind of lurid public display.. .a flaunting of intimacy long dead and gone" (37). While we are told the man "Had run an extension cord on out there.. .Things worked no different from how it was inside" (Carver, Love 4),

things are most assuredly working different from how they were inside; or perhaps they are not, and that is why the woman has left. Bethea questions, "So there was a breakup, yet this answer begets another question, namely, what caused the breakup?" and Bethea continues, "Furthermore, the opening line links drinking and setting up the bedroom suite. If the relationship was destroyed by alcoholism, what caused the alcoholism?" (106). Thus, the iceberg groweth.

With these inferences, we see that the man is in a peculiar state; the excessive drinking and bizarre redecoration insist this. However, there is more to this man's state than a mere post-breakup, alcoholic, redecoration and we see this clearly with one simple line of narration. The man is observing his front lawn and we see from his perspective: "Now and then a car slowed and people stared. But no one stopped. It occurred to him that he wouldn't either" (Carver, Love 4). This one line, "It occurred to him that he wouldn't either" is quite disturbing in its implications and we immediately discern that there is something more happening here, more at stake than the surface of the story would have us believe. The implications of this quote are a stunning example of the "Underground streams of unease [which] steal just beneath the narrative" (Saltzman 13). Stop what? We can only guess, as the narration gives us no hard facts, but merely allusions. Nessett theorizes that the man "won't stop" in that "he will survive in his own, however peculiar, way" (36), but the implications of this man's continuance are more violent, more menacing than a mere 'peculiar survival'. There is a threat of *something* here, and it is menacing, but we can only suspect, and this suspicion lends itself to the tension below the story's surface.

This portrayal of characters in the midst of their unraveling is a common template in Carver's stories. Let into a present situation, we are given little, if any, of the past and future of the characters whose lives we are witnessing; but by the demeanor and action of the story's characters we sense that of both of these time periods invade the story, and, in fact, haunt it. In this way, we see the past and the future misfortunes of the characters as an iceberg here: elements not directly in the narration, but lying just below the surface and creating tension. "Why Don't You Dance" is a perfect example of this technique. While Ewing Campbell, in Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction, asserts, and correctly so, that "Why Don't You Dance," "takes place after the storm," and "is one example of fiction initiated in the aftermath of such a tempest" (43); we are still given virtually no information on the events leading up to the point where we enter the story. We can discern an idea of the past (the man has recently separated from his partner) through certain aspects or allusions found in the story, but we have no clear understanding of it, only inferences. The future, too, is present in the man's claim "that he wouldn't [stop] either" (156), which implies actions in the future. As readers we are dis-eased by these time periods, as they do not exist in the actual narration but create a tension below the story's surface.

The same 'haunting' is true for the young couple. While at first glance they seem a stock, young and happy couple, when each of their actions and interactions in the story are observed more closely, we see that there is a hint of tension in their relationship as well. We can begin to see the couple at some sort of odds.

The young girl proves more of a maverick than the young boy, and as they begin to inspect the man's belongings "in a rehearsal of postures and affectations they hope to

suit to these items" (Saltzman 102), we see this in the young boy's obvious trepidation in honoring the young girl's request to join her on the bed. "I feel funny," he says (Carver, Love 5). We see that there is certainly something "funny" going on here and the young couple intimates this by the way they interact. The boy does join her on the bed, and when he does, the girl becomes immediately sexual in her advances. She asks him to kiss her, and he responds, "let's get up" (5). The boy does not get up; instead "he just sat up and stayed where he was, making believe he was watching the television" (5). The boy's refusal to kiss the girl can be seen as a reflection of their own bedside manner and infers a tension lurking below the surface of the couple's conversation, as Nessett states: "The tensions here, filling the interstices of a conversation they conduct lying down, of all places, on a bed, are grounded in sexual politics" (38).

The girl then makes the comment, "Wouldn't it be funny if," and she doesn't finish her statement, as she does not need to. The boy's response to this is to laugh, "but for no good reason" (5). This "no good reason" is poignant and is repeated in his action in response to her question, "for no good reason he switched the reading lamp on" (5). This simple phrase "for no good reason" alludes to a definite tension in the couple's relationship, as Bethea states, "If he laughs at the half-stated suggestion to have sex and is wrong to do so, a lack of passion is implied" (107).

With this hint of tension in the young couple's relationship, a reflection of the man's failed relationship begins to emerge. This reflection is a haunting undercurrent of the story and grows completely out of the unsaid, residing below the surface of the actual narration. While we are never directly given the facts on the state or the nature of the young couple's relationship, we gain from subtle hints that there is a tension present.

With this tension in the young couple's relationship, it is impossible not to parallel it with the man's failed relationship.

Thus we are presented with a timeline of human relationships of sorts, in the young couple's relationship we see the man's past relationship and perhaps the course of events which led to its eventual demise. In "Why Don't You Dance," Carver uses "the barest events to communicate what no amount of exposition can" (Hallett 52). With the last line of the story: "There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time she quit trying" (Carver, Love 10), we see the young girl "knowing that something has gone drastically wrong, but without realizing precisely what it is" (Campbell 45). While the young girl "failed to discover the implications of what she has encountered" (44), we have not, and through examination of the iceberg we can see that, "By juxtaposing one couple's beginning and the aftermath of a dissolution, Carver creates a tension that is immediately felt in the reading" (44-45).

Often times this is the case in Carver's fiction. The characters are vaguely aware of the fact that there is something more at stake than merely a bizarre yard sale, a divorce, an infidelity or a bankruptcy. As readers, we are afforded the opportunity to go back through the story and gain a more concrete understanding of what is below the surface of the narration from various allusions or hints from dialogue. As readers, we become aware of what Saltzman calls "extratextual reality", and can identify the tension that the characters are only dimly aware of (Powell 647).

The first story in Carver's collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* presents us with such a character, vaguely aware of the 'iceberg'. "Fat" begins with the narrator telling us "I am sitting over coffee and cigarettes at my friend Rita's and I am

telling her about it" (Carver, Quiet 1). The narrator, who is a waitress, then recalls to her friend how she had served "the fattest person I have ever seen" (1). She describes her interactions with this fat man as she brings him his meal: several baskets of bread, Caesar salad, bowl of soup, baked potato, pork chops, and two deserts. The narrator is in some way greatly affected by this large customer, so much so that when her boyfriend Rudy, who is a cook at the restaurant, makes sexual advances at her that night she states: "When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (6).

While she is greatly affected by the fat man, she, like the young girl in "Why Don't You Dance," and many other Carver characters, has "failed to discover the implications of what she has encountered" (Campbell 44). She realizes that she has been affected, as while she is recounting her story to Rita she says, "I know now I was after something" (Carver, Quiet 4), but she cannot fully understand the implications, "But I don't know what" (4) (Neset 14). When her boyfriend calls the man fat, the narrator responds, "but that is not the whole story" (Carver, Quiet 5).

Again, we are after the "whole story", and as the young girl in "Dance," this narrator, too, reflects our own role as readers. While the narrator might fail to completely understand her experience, by now we know where we must look in order to retrieve the "whole story".

When the narrator is describing the fat man to her friend, she says, "it is the fingers I remember best" (1), and she goes on to describe them "long, thick, creamy fingers.. .three times the size of a normal person's fingers" (1). There is obvious phallic imagery here, and we can begin to see that the narrator is in some way aroused by the fat

man's potency (Runyun 12). The narrator is so affected, in fact, she knocks over the man's glass of water (Bethea 11), "I am so keyed up or something, I knock over his glass of water" (Carver, Quiet 2). In fact, as Randolph Runyun states in Reading Raymond Carver, the narrator believes "To be fat, then, is to be sexually powerful, even virile" (12). Later that evening, this fascination, this arousal from her experience with the fat man is also seen when the narrator tells us that she "put my hand on my middle and wonder what would happen if I had children and one of them turned out to look like that, so fat" (Carver, Quiet 6). The fat man is tied into her sexual fantasies here, and as well as when the narrator is in the midst of intercourse with her boyfriend and imagines herself "terrifically fat" (6).

While the fat man represents virility and power to the narrator, she tells the fat man "Me, I eat and eat and I can't gain, I say. I'd like to gain," (5). As fatness represents power to the narrator, and she cannot gain weight, we see that she feels powerless in her own life. The feeling of powerlessness in the narrator is not stated outright, but is implied and creates tension under the surface of the story, and can be seen in her sexual encounter with Rudy: "Rudy begins. I turn on my back and relax some, though it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (6). Thus, in her powerlessness, in this case sexual, she imagines that she is fat and therefore renders Rudy "inconsequential" (Hallett 54). In this light, we see the narrator's fascination with the fat man as a fascination with the power she imagines is tied to largeness. Runyun states, "She wants to become the fat man" (Runyun 12), and while this is true, the narrator really wants the power she associates with the fat man.



The beginning and the ending of the story present us with the tip of an 'iceberg' in the form of one word: "it" (Hallett). The first line of the story states: "I am sitting over coffee and cigarettes at my friend Rita's house and I am telling her about /Y" (Carver, Quiet 1), and in the last lines of the story, which describe Rita's reaction to the story the narrator has just told:

That's a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she  
doesn't know what to make of *it*.

I feel depressed. But I won't go into *it* with her.. .My life  
is going to change. I feel *it*. (Carver, Quiet 6)

This usage of the word is vague in its application, but enormous in its implication, and is an example of how, in two letters, Carver creates tension underneath the story's surface.

Hallett describes its usage in terms of Hemingway:

Here the reference to 'it' is reminiscent of the use of 'it' in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants", for in both stories 'it' refers to individual aspects of 'it,' as well as to an all-inclusive 'it': in 'Hills,' 'it' refers to an abortion, a baby, the choice, and the whole situation; in "Fat," 'it' is the encounter with an obese customer, separate visions/versions of fat, being^ecoming fat. Compulsion versus choice, and an over-all implied principle of difference. (53)

With this connotation of "it", we see the narrator referring to the iceberg throughout the story. As she is giving details of the story to Rita, she says "Now that's part *of it*. I think

that's really part of *if*" (Carver, Quiet 2). Arthur Bethea refers to this pronoun as well, stating that in the narrator's last lines of the story, "The it that the narrator 'won't go into' might refer to an affair between the cook and Margo, the 'one who chases Rudy,' or to a pregnancy" (13). While it is possible that Rudy and Margo are having an affair, we are able to find actual implication of the narrator's pregnancy in the narrative. We need only recall when the narrator "put my hand on my middle and wonder what would happen if I had children," and to link this with the last line of the story, "My life is going to change. I feel *if*" (Carver, Quiet 5-6). If this is true, and we can only infer that it is, then the narrator's life will certainly change, and the *it* she feels is the child inside her womb.

With this implication then, the narrator's fascination with the fat man takes on quite another aspect, and one, as well, that is similar to the timeline juxtaposition seen in "Why Don't You Dance": the woman sees in the fat man a reflection of her pregnant, larger self in the future. Carver has achieved all of these implications, literally set up a series of tensions underneath the surface of the narration, by way of the simple pronoun "it".

We see this same tension lurking under the surface of the narration in "Neighbors" as well. The story revolves around a couple, Bill and Arlene Miller, who are taking care of their neighbor's apartment while they are away on vacation. Instead of feeding the cat and watering the plants, what transpires is an unusual, voyeuristic exhibition as Bill Miller becomes obsessed with entering the stones' apartment and living vicariously through their personal possessions. With each trip to the Stones' apartment, Bill's behavior intensifies and the story culminates in a description of Bill and Arlene's desperation at having locked themselves out of their neighbor's apartment. While the

surface details of the story show us a house-sitter's bizarre forays, the implications of Bill's behavior create a tension that drives the story, a tension that lies beneath the surface of the narrative.

We are not distinctly told what would possess the Millers to engage in such behavior, and this behavior at once goes far beyond the bounds of normal curiosity. While we are never directly given information which would explain such bizarre behavior, we are given subtle hints that could explain what would possess them to do so as well as why their reaction is so desperate when they lock themselves out of the Stones' apartment.

As Bill and Arlene Miller watch the Stones drive away, Arlene says, "God knows, we could use a vacation" (Carver, Quiet 8). This quote introduces us to a sense of jealousy that could offer explanation as to the Millers' behavior in the Stones' apartment. We are told in the beginning of the story that Bill and Arlene Miller are "a happy couple. But now and then they felt that they alone had been passed by somehow" (7). It makes us wonder, passed by how? We understand more fully the nature of their sense of deficiency when we are given, "They talked about it sometimes, mostly in comparison with the lives of their neighbors, Harriet and Jim Stone" (7). We begin to see that the Stones represent what the Millers feel they are not, that in comparison, the Stones feel that they come up short. We are told that Jim and Harriet are able to take many vacations, Jim combining business and pleasure trips. Meanwhile, Bill and Arlene feel stuck with their bookkeeping and secretarial chores. With this sense of envy exposed, we can begin to understand the motivations of the Millers.

Bill is the first to enter the Stones' apartment, and while it is only "across the hall" we see that to Bill it could be some sort of "paradise" (Nesset 13): "Bill took a deep breath as he entered the Stones' apartment. The air was already heavy and vaguely sweet" (Carver, Quiet 8) and later, "Inside it seemed cooler than his apartment, and darker too" (11). We get a sense from these lines that Bill, himself, as Saltzman states, is taking "a vacation from himself" (Saltzman 25). We watch as Bill steals a bottle of Harriet Stones' medication, finds their Chivas Regal and takes two drinks from the bottle (Carver, Quiet 8). Bill is quite literally 'making himself at home' in the Stones' apartment (Carver 8).

When Bill returns from across the hall, the consequences of his visit are immediately apparent: Bill has become sexually aroused by his foray across the hall (Hallett 55). When Arlene asks him why he was so long, Bill responds "Playing with Kitty," and then "went over and touched her breasts 'Lets go to bed honey'" (Carver 9).

Bill is quite sexually aroused, in fact, as he comes home from work early the next day and surprises Arlene:

"Let's go to bed," he said.

"Now?" She Laughed. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing. Take your dress off." He grabbed for her awkwardly, and she said, "Good, God Bill."

(qtd. Bethea 69)

This passage is quite telling. We can tell from Arlene's response, "'Now?' She laughed" (Carver, Quiet 9), that an afternoon occasion such as this is not the norm for the Millers, and we can infer that Bill's behavior is a consequence of his behavior in his

neighbors' apartment, which William Stull calls "a psychosexual rumpus room" (qtd. Nessel 12). While Nessel argues that the influence of this "rumpus" room "is not altogether bad" (Nessel 12), Arthur Bethea suggests that there is "something unhealthy to this sexual encounter" (Bethea 69). Bethea states that (in the above quoted encounter), "The negative connotations of nothing and awkwardly," infer this unhealthiness (69). Bethea goes further by looking at the lack of intimacy that follows this encounter "Later they...ate hungrily, without speaking" (qtd. 69). We begin to see Bill's sexual arousal as compulsive here, and perhaps but a symptom of something deeper happening in Bill.

While Arlene's question at once seems innocent enough "What's gotten into you?" (Carver 9), the implications are weighty. Quite literally, in fact, the Stones' have gotten into Bill, as Campbell states that "Bill Miller's behavior consists of two kinds of endeavors: pointedly taking in substances that belong to the Stones and inserting himself into their spaces and belongings" (Campbell 15). We see this 'taking in' of the Stones' possessions in his taking of Harriet's pills, the "deep breath" he took upon entering the Stones' apartment, and the whiskey he drank (15). While Campbell asserts that these actions "result in increased sexual activity at home", we see that these actions indicate something more (15).

While we have seen Bill "taking in" the Stones' possessions, it is when Bill calls in sick from work in order to spend more time in the Stones' apartment that we understand there is more going on here, more at stake than merely gaining sexual gratification or arousal through the invasion of another's personal belongings. It is then we see Bill "inserting himself into their spaces and belongings" (15). During this trip into the Stones' apartment Bill continues in "taking in" the stones' possessions: "he moved

slowly through each room considering everything that fell under his gaze, carefully, one object at a time. He saw ashtrays, items of furniture, kitchen utensils, the clock. He saw everything" (Carver, Quiet 11). It is after 'taking it all in' that Bill Miller begins to 'insert himself into the Stones' possessions, and it is in this action that, as Hallett states, "his movements become bizarre" (Hallett 55). Bill enters the Stones' bedroom and lay down on the Stones' bed, inserting himself into the most intimate of their spaces, and "then he moved his hand under his belt" (Carver, Quiet 11), an action which Campbell insists implies masturbation (Campbell 16).

Bill then begins to look through the Stones' closet, "He put on a blue shirt, a dark suit, a blue and white tie, black wing tip shoes" (Carver, Quiet 11). While trying on Jim Stones' clothing is certainly bizarre, it is at the moment that Bill "stepped into the panties and fastened the brassiere," that we are shocked and are immediately confronted with the strength of the tension inherent below the narration (12).

The implications of Bill's behavior are all below the surface of the story, alluded to only by his actions, and it is from these implications that we understand that there is something more to the story than a bizarre cross-dressing fiasco. We have ascertained through their comments at the beginning of the story that Bill and Arlene feel unable to have the life that the Stones live, and they feel inadequate because of it. Bill finds so much pleasure in his forays across the hall and keeps returning, each time increasing the level of intrusion, not merely because of the obvious consequence of sexual arousal which the story shows us in so many ways, but because in doing so Bill is able to live vicariously through the Stones' possessions. To go even further, for the brief time Bill spends inside the stone's apartment, he becomes the Stones. In assuming, vicariously, the

roles and items of the Stones' life, Bill becomes, briefly, everything he is not. Bill commits what Saltzman calls a "symbolic coup" (25). In a sense, he is taking the vacation that Arlene states "God knows" they need: a vacation from the reality of his own life and into the Stones' (25).

An image which shows us how strong Bill's desire is to assume the role of the Stones', as well as the distance from reality his forays have taken him, are the mirrors in the Stones' apartment: an image which appears enough times so that we realize it must signify something greater. In his first encounter "He looked at himself in the mirror and then closed his eyes and looked again" (Carver, Quiet 8). In light of Bill's actions in the story and their implications, we understand just who Bill wanted to see after he opened his eyes. As Bill no doubt regrettably found himself there, he begins to take more drastic measures in assuming the Stones' identity. The next time he looks in the mirror is after he had "moved his hand under his belt" (11) in the Stones' bed. It is immediately after this action that we are told Bill

tried to remember when the Stones were due back, and then he wondered if they would ever return. He could not remember their faces or the way they talked and dressed. He sighed and with effort rolled off the bed to lean over the dresser and look at himself in the mirror. (11)

We can see just how far from reality Bill is when he begins to fantasize that the Stones will not return (Campbell 16). As well, Bill has effectively erased the Stones from his memory, and tries to replace their vision in the mirror with his. However, he is still unsatisfied.

The next time Bill looks in the mirror, he is wearing Jim Stones' clothing and when he looks in the mirror he "crossed his legs, and smiled, observing himself in the mirror" (Carver, Quiet 11). Bill is no doubt pleased with the image that he sees for he has effectively, in his own mind, and quite literally, filled the Stones' shoes: in this case Jim's "black wing tips" (11).

It is after Arlene's first trip into the Stones' apartment that the door to the story is effectively closed. While we do not follow her actions in the apartment as we do Bill's, we understand they are identical when Bill meets her in hallway coming out of the Stones': "He noticed white lint clinging to the back of her sweater and the color was high in her cheeks" (13). Arlene tells Bill that she "found some pictures" (13), and while the pictures are never described, we understand the nature of them from the Millers' exchange: "What kind of pictures?" Bill asks, and Arlene replies, "You can see for yourself (13). Bill and Arlene decide to go into the Stones' together, bonded as they have become in their similar experiences, and it is then that Arlene realizes "My God.. .I left the key inside' (14). The Millers' reaction to becoming locked out betrays the nature of their situation, and thus, the implications of their actions:

Her lips were parted, and her breathing was expectant. He opened his arms and she moved into them.

"Don't worry," he said into her ear. "for God's sake, don't worry."

They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves. (14)



We certainly agree with Hallett's description of the Millers' reaction to this event as "peculiarly desperate" (55), but their reaction implies more than desperation and is closer to "devastated," as Bethea suggests (71). In this final scene, the devastation at being locked out of their newfound happiness, shows just how much "they feel they have been passed by" (Carver, Quiet 7). In the hallway between their apartment and the Stones', a place Nasset describes as "limbo" (14), both the 'brighter life' of the Stones and their own feeling of being "passed by" become painfully clear, as "they glimpse the terrifying banality of their lives and have no key to open the door to a better future" (Bethea 71). In this sense, "the locked door represents the story's essential emotion of perceived deprivation" (Campbell 17).

While Carver tells us that he is not a minimalist, we see his incorporation of the 'iceberg' model into his short stories as a minimalist technique. With a knowledge of literary minimalism, Carver's statements, "Its true that I try to eliminate every unnecessary detail in my story" (Gentry, Stull 44), and "What creates tension in a piece of fiction... [is] also the things that are left out, that are implied" (Carver 17), can be viewed as a testimony of minimalism.

Minimalism might well be a "pejorative" term, critically speaking, but Raymond Carver's application of it is astounding; we are captivated when we collide with the tension below the surface of his fiction. With a term that he declared, "smacks of smallness of vision" (Gentry, Stull 44), Carver has shown us, in fact, a much larger vision: a vision of the human condition. While he has not told us much, Raymond Carver has indeed shown us a great deal.

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