THE MACKSEY JOURNAL
Johns Hopkins University • Baltimore, MD

Volume 3 Article 14

2022

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Abstract

Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) tells seventeen different short stories united under common themes of disconnection, stagnation, and introspection. This paper focuses on the motif of stagnation in the short-story cycle and how the use of repeating behaviors throughout the collection both highlights the theme in the cycle and elevates the problems discussed in this cycle past the characters and scenarios on the page. Throughout the stories "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit," "Sacks," and "A Serious Talk," Carver incorporates repeating thought patterns and actions through stretched periods of time and from parents to their children. The repeated behaviors found in each story reveal the stagnant mindset of the characters within the story but also eliminate the circumstances surrounding each scenario, directly confronting the fundamental human issues that lie underneath. This paper distinguishes Carver's collection as a statement on communication in the modern-day and shows how the use of repeating cycles propels the problems faced in the collection to a more universal perspective.

Keywords: Raymond Carver, American Literature, English, short story

Throughout his brilliant writing, Raymond Carver showcases and dives into the lives and feelings of the common man, exploring the problems of connection, love, and introspection. Carver's minimalist style allows for the extensive use of symbols and motifs that give deeper insight into the details hidden in the story. Throughout Raymond Carver's short-story cycle, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), the motif of repetition is used to highlight the lack of change in the characters' disposition and environment, while also shifting the problems faced by the characters to a more widened and universal perspective.

While many of Carver's stories feature some degree of stagnation in a character's life, the strongest aspect of that stagnation can be found in the story, "A Serious Talk." As Burt returns to apologize to Vera, he looks outside to see a "bicycle without a front wheel standing upside down'' (108). The bicycle, along with the many other details of the home given throughout the story, serves as a metaphor for the state of the family and its negative impact on the children. The bicycle, an object designed for movement, is not only lacking a wheel but upside down as well. The back wheel of a bicycle is connected to the chain, while the front wheel is used for steering. Just like the bike, Burt is left without direction after Vera left him, and is stuck in a cycle of destructive behavior and disconnection. As the pedals will infinitely turn the chain wheel in place, Burt will continually return to the home to have his "serious talk." Hilary Seibert dives into the importance of the home and its condition in relation to Carver's characters: "We can gain an interesting perspective on Carver's stories by looking first at how the intimate spaces in which they are set establish character identity" (12). Looking at the details of the broken home in Carver's "A Serious Talk" reveals the endless cycle of disconnection, jealousy, and anger that plagues the man that lived in it.

Although Burt is the aggressor in this story, Vera is also stagnant and stuck in an infinite cycle. Vera continually allows Burt to act up and return to the home: "'Do you remember Thanksgiving?' she said. 'I said then that was the last holiday you were going to wreck for us'" (108). Despite saying that Thanksgiving was the last holiday that she would include Burt, Burt was allowed to celebrate Christmas. And even after ruining that, Vera still allows him to enter the home again the next day when he comes to apologize. While Burt is trapped in the cycle of never getting over losing his family and being trapped in jealousy, Vera is trapped in a dream that things can become better, or the dream that her children can connect with their biological father. Michael Hemmingson explains that Vera has "let him back into the familial interaction, perhaps (deep down) hoping things will change… This is endemic of most, if not all, Carver characters-if only they would show sincerity, speak up, things might change" (218). Raymond Carver presents people in his stories who are indefinitely trapped in cycles of behaviors, relationships, and circumstances, but they are ultimately unable to see or do what they need to do in order to break that cycle.

Even though Carver creates these characters who are stuck in cyclical lives and ultimately remain stagnant, many of his stories still provide a moment of understanding: a time where the characters become truly aware of themselves and their lives but are still unable to change. Günter Leypoldt describes these moments as an "arrested epiphany," where "the centers of consciousness realize, with an often disquieting sense of menace, that there is something out of joint in their world, that at some level they are on the brink of making a tremendous discovery, but they remain far from grasping what exactly it could be" (535).

Leypoldt's epiphany is found through the father in the story "Sacks." As the father tries to explain his reasoning for telling his story, he is unable to pinpoint why he must tell it: "I'll tell you, Les. I'll tell you what's the most important thing involved here. You see, there are things. More Important things than your mother leaving me" (44). The father feels that something is wrong, that this conversation is vital to his character, but that is as far as he goes. He knows that this conversation is important, but he cannot understand why. Michael Vander Weele reiterates this, saying that "The tragedy of Carver's 'low-rent tragedies' is not, finally, the broken marriages or drunken violence we meet in his stories, but the characters' inability to go beyond their puzzlement over the significance of such events" (112)[1] The father's failed understanding is what leads to his stagnation, and, to a degree, the repeated behaviors exhibited by his son.

In the same way that the father remains stagnant and unable to identify his struggles, Les also ends up following the same path as his father and becoming just as lost. At the beginning of the story, we see the exact same movements of his father in Les: "I want to pass along to you a story my father told me when I stopped over in Sacramento last year" (37). Just as the father is seen relaying his story in an attempt to process and understand his own decisions, Les too is looking back on a moment in an attempt to extract the importance behind what is largely the same story. Raymond Carver layers two variations of the same story, told from two different perspectives, two different places in time, but the function and the result of the story are entirely the same, creating the sense of repetition in the struggles and experiences that will never change without direct action. As the story ends with the father unable to discover meaning from his experience, it begins with the son attempting to do the same thing as he narrates his experience. Weele highlights the connection between the father and the son, saying that the father "is responsible for his own actions, to be sure, but he also seems a victim unable to say more than that he senses something important needs to be said. The son is also responsible for this inability. He is either too insensitive or too unwilling to help build a context for meaningful speech" (115). Just as both the father and the son are unable to understand the importance of their experiences and actions, they are both responsible for their own conditions. Weele points out, "The woman at the bar draws the attention not only of the son but also of the father… She may also link father and son. They may both have known woman [sic] in this way, enticing because forbidden, stripped of any relationship to others" (114-15). Through the father's infidelity and inability to move toward change, his son has followed down the same path, taking on the same set of problems as his father before him.

The ideas of the arrested epiphany and an endless cycle of behavior are strengthened and expanded through the connections to the story immediately preceding "Sacks," "I Could See the Smallest Things." The story similarly brings a character to a moment of clarity and self-reflection: "I thought for a minute of the world outside my house, and then I didn't have any more thoughts except the thought that I had to hurry up and sleep" (36). Nancy is faced with an encounter with her neighbor that is meaningful and vulnerable, she is separated from her home

[1] The same instance of failing to understand importance can also be found in Carver's Short story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Mel decides to tell the story of the old couple in the hospital and insists that the story is important, but Mel is unable to understand why that memory is important to him. Mel is also a victim of Leypoldt's "arrested epiphany," He gets the feeling that something is off, and the story he tells is on the verge of a drastic change, but he is unable to extract that meaning and is left stagnant.

and her duties that occupy her during the daytime, and she is free of the influences that usually surround her. Hilary Siebert identifies this condition with the term “A Glimpse Outside: in these texts, circumstances bring characters suddenly to consciousness of a world outside the domain of their daily lives” (20). In the darkness of night, with her husband asleep, Nancy is able to gain a new perspective on her life, but ultimately rejects the new viewpoint she discovered, rushing towards sleep in order to remove herself from those conditions that brought her a moment of realization. “Sacks” replicates nearly the same conditions that were present in the previous story: Les is traveling alone away from his home and without his family, he is presented with an intensely important and personal conversation with his father, and Les remains unchanged throughout the experience. While Nancy was able to gain perspective for a moment in her new environment before rejecting it, Les is consistently resistant to any sort of insight during what could have been a moment of clarity. Carver shows this through Les’ disengagement from the conversation and thought through distraction and the symbol of the window found in both stories. Carver contrasts the two views that are seen through the windows: Nancy’s window provides “light enough so that I could see everything in the yard” (31) while the hotel that Les occupies has a view that is obstructed by “lights coming on in some of the buildings, smoke from the tall stacks rising in a thick climb” (37). The serenity of Nancy’s perspective is contrasted with the worldview that is distracted and obscured by the landscape of the city. Hemmingson agrees that Carver’s “characters are too preoccupied with the physical objects that give them a buzz to deflect from what is really going on in their lives” (218) and that deflection is what brings Les away from the exposure to human connection that is seen in “I Could See the Smallest Things.” Les’ unwillingness to engage with others, as well as his inability to take responsibility and look introspectively, is what fuels his stagnation and is why he is unable to process the importance behind the story he tells.

In Carver’s story “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit,” the same problems and themes of repetition found throughout the short-story cycle are found once again. We are left once again with a character that is unable to extract meaning from events in their lives, lacks introspection, and will ultimately follow the same path of their father. Just like the story “Sacks,” “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit" is told from the narrator reminiscing about past events: “I’ve seen some things” (17). As the narrator looks back, the events he includes are important to him and connected to each other as he tries to understand why these events are important to him. Alongside the main story of his wife’s affair, he includes the memory of his father’s passing and his mother moving on to another man: “Even so, it was hard. I stood with my hand on the railing and watched as the man kissed her… My dad died in his sleep, drunk” (17-20). These events combined into one memory show the parallels between the narrator's life and his father’s: the disconnection from their family, an alcohol addiction, and the unwillingness to change. The narrator sees these parallels and is disturbed by these memories, but constantly looks back in an attempt to understand them. Although the narrator knows that he will die and Myrna will move on without him, he is still unable to move towards change. Weele points out that “Carver regularly situates his characters so that they realize the need to move from a more passive willingness to an active, discoursed will. But they seldom accomplish this movement” (113), and that realization can be found in the narrator. The narrator understands where he is headed because he includes his father’s and mother’s experiences into his story, but he is still unable to

move towards a change. The narrator identifies and knows the cycle that he is caught in but chooses to continue participating in it rather than actively change his life for the better. While there are many different motifs used throughout *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,* Raymond Carver's use of repeated stories and cycles drastically influences the overall theme and narrative of the short-story cycle by widening the scale of the stories and themes that Carver shows. The introduction of repetition eliminates the constraints surrounding time and personal situations found in these stories. When a problem is seen through many different times, places, and people, the issues discussed can no longer be viewed as a situation based on particular circumstances. The problems that are discussed in "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit," "Sacks," and "A Serious Talk" are not exclusive to that moment but will return again infinitely through a son or through another holiday without a definitive change. The presence of that cycle elevates the issues of connectivity and responsibility past specific characters and settings and encourages a view that addresses these problems on a larger scale. Clifford Thompson argues that "in this endless landscape of things, Carver's people are just so many more objects, with either the commonest of names or no names at all, cursed with consciousness but no more blessed with understanding than the deodorant or the floss" (10). The universality of Carver's characters, places, and problems point to the idea that the issues discussed throughout this short-story cycle are fundamentally human, and the presence of these cyclical situations and behaviors suggest that these problems will always be around. Throughout Raymond Carver's short-story cycle *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, The theme of cycles empowers the theme of stagnation found throughout the collection while also addressing the problems discussed in the stories as universal issues rather than ones bound by circumstance. These infinite cycles that are explored throughout the collection highlight the importance of the changes needed to solve the problems that plague people and cause them to continually live in these cycles of pain. Without the drive to change one's situation, behavior, or worldview, the only other course is to remain the same, infinitely repeating the same mistakes that plague these characters.

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