'This Word Love': Sexual Politics and Silence in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*

**Author:** Kirk Nesset  
**Date:** 1995  
**From:** The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study  
**Publisher:** Ohio University Press  
**Reprint In:** Short Story Criticism (Vol. 104.)  
**Document Type:** Critical essay  
**Length:** 8,667 words

---

Full Text:

(essay date 1995) In the following excerpt, Nesset outlines Carver's representation of chaotic life and the failure of language as seen through the troubled marriages and general domestic malaise in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*.

"Omnia vincit Amor: et nos cedamus Amori.

One of the more striking things about Carver's first volume of stories is that as a collection it is hardly uniform in subject or voice. Instead, it embodies what William Stull calls Carver's "formative years," providing, as another critic writes, an exploration of "a common plight rather than a common subject."¹ In *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Carver ranges from the Kafkaesque expressionism of "The Father" to the anecdotal simplicity of "Nobody Said Anything" to the heavier, mildly Faulknerian prose of "Sixty Acres" (in keeping with the style of earlier stories published later in *Furious Seasons*), and he ranges with similar freedom from subject to subject. Despite such diversity, a number of constants arise in the volume, elements marking out the stylistic and the thematic path Carver will follow in the course of his literary career. Most prevalent among these constants is the issue of love--or, more precisely, the issue of love and its absence, and the bearing of love's absence on marriage and individual identity. "His Jamesian donnee was marriage," Stull writes, referring to the early work, and "in particular," he adds, citing Carver, "'a certain terrible kind of domesticity' that he termed 'dis-ease.'"² Even this early, love and its maladies are already an "obsession" for Carver (he hated the word "theme"). With the appearance of his next volume, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, love takes full predominance, figuring as the organizational device, as its title attests; one reviewer describes the work as "a set of variations on the themes of marriage, infidelity and the disquieting tricks of human affection"--an assessment applicable to Carver's first book of fiction as well.³

Many of these "disquieting tricks" Carver addresses in his poems, which tend to deal more straightforwardly with his obsessions than do the stories. In 1976--the year *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* went to press--Carver brought out a chapbook of poems called *At Night the Salmon Move*, a slim, limited-edition book concluding with a poem called "This Word Love":

I will not go when she calls  
even if she says I love you,  
especially that,  
even though she swears  
and promises nothing  
but love love.  
The light in this room  
covers every  
thing equally;  
my arm throws no shadow even,  
it too is consumed with light.  
But this word love--  
this word grows dark, grows  
heavy and shakes itself  
and begins to eat  
through this paper.  
Listen.⁴

In Carver's early stories, as in this poem, love is a darkly unknowable and irreversible force, a sickness of sorts that not only...
complicates but dominates lives. Characters are alternately bewildered, enraged, diminished, suffocated, isolated, and entrapped by love, though unlike the speaker of the poem, who acknowledges the power love exerts over his life, they rarely recognize their circumstances as such. As the word “grows dark” in their lives—as love begins to eat through them, and they find themselves either betraying or betrayed, trapped in a kind of sexuality they cannot understand—they become partakers of sexual politics that not only bring on love’s sicknesses but, like bad medicine, worsen the malady. For Carver’s lovers, the politics of sex ultimately reflect a kind of larger politics, more tenuous and more ominous still: the politics of fortune and fate which, forever unseen and unheard, dictate the bleak circumstances of their lives, provoking the bafflement and dismay that is for them a daily fact of existence. Evoked by the politics of Carver’s uniquely hardscrabble domesticity, the marriages of Will You Please are scaled-down models representing larger, more terrifying politics, or antipolitics—models reflecting, in human form, the arbitrariness and caprice and chaos of the world in which those marriages are rooted.

Just as strikingly, the individual failures of characters (their ailing and broken marriages in particular) are recapitulated in the individual failures of their tongues. Like the speaker of “This Word Love,” they are struck dumb by love’s buffets; they wait, they “Listen,” and there, usually, Carver leaves them, disconcerted, expectant, lingering passively at the edge of despair. Thus another constant in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, as its title suggests, is the issue of language and its limitations (the second volume also picks up this issue, with its emphasis on “talk”). As many critics have observed, this issue is spelled out in the stories as inarticulateness in the brooding silences of characters, a phenomenon mirrored and enhanced by the sparseness of what has been aptly dubbed Carver’s “unforgiving prose.” Still, despite such limitations—despite what many characters sense to be a built-in system of failure—Carver’s is not a despairing world. “Raymond Carver’s America is helpless,” Michael Wood writes, “clouded by pain and the loss of dreams, but it is not as fragile as it looks. It is a place of survivors and a place of stories.” The survivors who people these stories, as Carver says in an interview, “do the best they can” given the nature of their circumstances. They talk, however unsuccessfully; they have sex, or avoid it. They employ both their bodies and tongues in efforts to find themselves again, struggling to reassemble the bits and pieces of their tattered identities, and they continue struggling, even as their bodies get them into trouble and their tongues, taking them forever in circles, fall silent.

Perhaps the most frequently commented-upon of Carver’s stories—after “Cathedral” and “A Small, Good Thing”—is “Neighbors,” a tale of marriage in the process of diminishing. As with so many of Carver’s fictive marriages, the story deals less with love or passion than with its conspicuous absence, and with the symptoms of love’s withdrawal. It is the tale of Bill and Arlene Miller, a “happy couple” who, now that the original intensity of their marriage has dwindled, experience sexual titillation in the home of their neighbors, which they have agreed to look after (a story that Joyce Carol Oates borrows for “Harrow Street at Linden,” a more graphic representation of an identical titillation and its effects). As in “The Idea,” a story concerned specifically with voyeurism, “Neighbors” presents a pair of figures who, as Arthur Saltzman notes of Carver’s early characters in general, are “obsessed with vicariousness.” Affected by overintimacy and the fading vitality of their marriage, they look outward, imagining themselves as others, seeking alternate, more attractive selves.

“[N]ow and then,” we learn early in the story, the Millers “felt they alone among their circle had been passed by somehow.” Planting themselves amidst the articles and residual energies of their vacationing friends, they experience vicariously a “fuller and brighter life.” With its plants and perhaps lurid photographs, with strangely exotic clothes available for the trying on—the “Hawaiian” shirts and “Bermudas” and brassieres and panties—their apartment is for the Millers, as Stull writes, a “psychosexual rumpus room” whose influence is not altogether bad. As the time they spend in the neighbors’ apartment lengthens,” Ann Beattie observes of the Millers, “their energy begins to bond them together, revitalizing their own marriage.” Suddenly reinfused with new life, vicariousness fanning the flames of erotic desire, they become conspirators, lovers attempting jointly to know the sexual selves of a couple whose existence seems more attractive than their own. But the Millers’ psychosexual games are not without their negative implications. As David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips have noted, Carver’s characters are often not simply voyeurs but “voyeurs ... of their own experience,” seekers in perilous games of peek-a-boo which, if carried far enough, yield “sudden, astonishing glimpses behind the curtain which separates their empty lives from chaos.” Carver is expert at “describing various types of emotional parasitism,” as one critic says referring to “Neighbors,” seeing in the story that form of “dis-ease” which, as the story’s ending suggests, results in psychic losses that far outrun erotic gains. Leaving the neighbor’s apartment after his first visit, Bill pauses, having “the feeling he had left something” inside. What both Bill and his wife leave behind are, in fact, themselves: shreds of the identities they have been trying self-destructively to nourish in their daily visitations across the hall—shreds that have grown, visit by visit, increasingly malnourished. Finally locked out of their new paradise, and too jaded in the end to appreciate the old quiet ways of the past, they are in “limbo” (as Boxer and Phillips put it), and thus, “dissociated from both lives, the Millers only have each other.”

Late twentieth-century versions of Dante’s Paolo and Francesca, Bill and Arlene wait in the hall, poised between lives. “They stayed there,” the story’s concluding sentences read; “They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves.” Like Dante’s lovers, they are intimate even in despair, but unlike their precursors, they are battered not by the winds of passion, by love out of control. Instead, Carver’s lovers brace themselves against the consequences of inauthentic passion, a false kind of love which, requiring its stimulus from outside influence, feeds on the attractive possibilities of other worlds and other lives at the cost of self. In “The Idea,” similarly, where “the voyeur motif is carried to an extreme,” an older couple peer out their window, making a nightly ritual of watching the man next door, who stands outside his own window watching his wife undress. Fully corrupted by inauthenticity, their sexual energies as dead as their verbal interchanges in general (and redirected now into eating, the only act—besides voyeurism—in which they partake with any zeal), this couple is the aging, decaying version of Bill and Arlene, a preview of the Millers’ ghost-life to come. Following the path of Vern and his wife in “The Idea,” the Millers toy with borrowed versions of love, conspiring to bankrupt themselves, both sexually and spiritually.

It is no coincidence, then, that as they embrace in the frantic final moments of the story they both refer to “God.” As Arlene realizes they are locked out of their new world—which represents for them not just paradise but also, ironically, Eden, the lost innocence of their early married life—she exclaims, “My God ... I left the key inside.” Bill, trying to reassure her, responds in kind: “For God’s sake,” he says, “don’t worry.” They have had not a single vital verbal interchange in the story, remarkably, until now, when, with an explosive suddenness of vitality, they cling to one another and indirectly call on God, invoking that abstract authority who is for them, in some
Way or another, the keeper of the larger keys. But the Millers' burst of verbal exuberance and physical intimacy is simultaneously a bang and a whimper. Their unconscious invocations of abstract authority (they are no churchgoers, certainly) testify to the degree of their powerlessness in the face of determined circumstance. Not only are they shut out, cut off from the possibilities of a "fuller and brighter life" in the future; they are also deprived of their past. Growing ever more desensitized, they shall know now only the imprisoning limbo of the present, that numbing atemporal world in which God is just one of many authorities authorizing hard knocks. Enacting the earlier fall of Vern and his wife—who, more sheltered by age and custom, are blown from the outside, their house buffeted by winds—Bill and Arlene "brace themselves" against the limbic winds of mediocrity and, when the words run out, reach out and hold on, comforting themselves the best way they can, while they can.

Love, as Oscar Wilde once so glibly put it, is a malady most often curable by marriage. In "Fat," as in many other stories, Carver explores this unfortunate and sometimes brutal reality, this time taking on the persona of a woman in a story of love gone sour, love that, though still as fresh as week-old milk in "Neighbors," was on the point of turning. It is a frame-tale in which a waitress, disillusioned with her job and her marriage, explains to a friend her mysterious attraction to an obese customer she has lately served. "I know now I was after something," she tells Rita, her friend, trying to get a handle on her fascination for the man. "But I don't know what." As the story unfolds we understand gradually that the waitress is being suffocated by her husband Rudy, with whom she both lives and works, and that in some curious way the fat man represents to her everything Rudy lacks. Polite, articulate and "well-dressed," the fat man is the token of a kind of opulence and gracious affability which makes the waitress's own dull life seem lean and shabby by comparison.16

More than a simple and grossly exaggerated symbol of another life, and more also than a means for retaliation on the part of the narrator (it is suggested, obliquely, that a flirtation is going on between Rudy and another waitress), the fat man is a being with whom, on a deeper, personal level, the narrator strongly identifies. His verbal tick, the sustained use of the royal "we," not only evokes regalness, that tired nobility which so moves the waitress; it evokes even more immediately a kind of complicity, a victimization common to fat man and waitress both. At the one point in their conversings in which they deviate from business—from the business of ordering and eating—the fat man says about the compulsive nature of his gorging, "If we had our choice, no. But there is no choice." Just as he is at the mercy of his appetite, and whatever lies behind that ("he is fat," the waitress tells her husband, "but that is not the whole story"), she too is at the mercy of her world, oppressed by a husband and work environment insensitive to her needs.

Like Nan in "The Student's Wife," the waitress shares her bed with a man with whom she has little in common, with a man who is, like the "businessmen" she daily serves at work, "very demanding." Feeling more distant from her husband than ever after her meeting with the fat man (and after Rudy, in his one talkative moment in the story, says exactly the wrong thing, describing the "fat guys" of his childhood), she "can't think of anything to say" and, undressing, gets into bed, moving "clear over to the edge." As she expects, however, "Rudy begins." Rudy's insistence furnishes physical testimony to what she has heard earlier, at the table of the fat man--there is "no choice" in such matters. Thus she allows Rudy to carry on, admitting nevertheless, as she tells Rita, that "it is against [her] will." Such compliance is, at the extreme—as another of Carver's reluctantly compliant females makes evident—a kind of violence like unto death: witness Claire's sexual acquiescence in "So Much Water So Close to Home," in which she identifies herself, water roaring in her ears, with a raped and murdered woman found naked in a creek, the corpse ignored by her husband and his friends until their fishing trip is conveniently over.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the waitress's vision of liberation comes to her during the act of sexual intercourse. But her vision is as strange as it is unfocused and, in a sense, misdirected. "When he gets on me," she tells Rita, "I suddenly feel fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all." Hoping on some level to free herself of her husband's suffocating influence, her desires for liberty take the form, consciously or unconsciously, of a literal, physical self-expansion whose dimensions reduce the man astride her, shrinking him both in importance and size. "Surely we have diminished one another," Carver writes in a poem (the opening poem of At Night the Salmon Move), the complaint of another lover falling out of love.17 In "Fat," ironically, the more diminished lover of the two—the wife—retaliates against her husband (psychically, imaginatively) in the very manner she has been abused, thus recapitulating her injuries. Reduced to the status of near-nonentity, she responds in a way that is simultaneously an adopting of Rudy's strategies and a private, uniquely personalized expression that centers and localizes diminishment at the very focus of violation: the flesh. Most vulnerable on the sexual level—what may be intimacy to one party is coercive trespass to another—the waitress transforms herself, in a vision, from non-self to mountains of self, identifying with the fat man and his determined world.

But visions, after all, are not escape routes, and just as Carver rarely affords his characters visions, he never affords them routes of escape. The waitress's story, though it provides for her in its telling a purgation or compensation of some kind (as talking does for Carver's characters, to a degree, in all of his books), like her vision of amplitude it does little to illuminate for her the dire matter of her unhappiness. Just as the girl in "Why Don't You Dance?"" keeps "talking" in an effort to get some equally disturbing details off her mind—trying in her own way "to get it all talked out"—so does the waitress of "Fat" unfold her tale. And like Rita, who "doesn't know what to make of it," and who "sits there waiting" at the end of the story, listening for some kind of interpretive nudge, the waitress remains oddly baffled in the wake of her tale, even as she is expectant about her life's forecast. "My life is going to change," she says in the final line of the story. "I feel it." (Is she intuiting the advent of pregnancy? She's just described an act of copulation and earlier had wondered "what would happen if [she] had children?"—children suggesting a liberation of sorts, but also another trap, a snare.) "Her inarticulateness," as one critic notes, "stakes out the limits of her growth of consciousness"; even more significantly, her closing words extend and reinforce such limits, reflected as they are in her use of the passive construction.18 She does not say "I am going to change my life," but "My life is going to change"—a different way of stating things. Verbal passivity is a close relative of passivity of action—it mirrors, in fact, the passive role she plays in bed—and the ultimate sense of the story's close is that the waitress will not act but will continue to be acted upon; she is programmed to see her life in those terms. Like the fat man, who admits that "A person has to be comfortable," and then, a victim of his appetite, can't stop eating long enough to remove his coat, Carver's waitress has not yet the capacity for putting on her expansive self, comfortable or uncomfortable as she may be.
A frail, mousy man wearing "slippers, pajamas, and robe," the protagonist of "Are You a Doctor?," Arnold Breit, spends many of his evenings alone while his wife, in an odd form of role reversal, is "away on business." One night his world is disrupted by a phone call from a woman whose forwardness upsets the patterned evenness of his world. As with the waitress in "Fat," his personal sense of self is threatened by sex, but in this case it is not so much sex that threatens as it is the mere potential for sexual mobility. Hence, reminding himself that "one couldn't take chances," Arnold temporarily evades the advances of the caller until, pressed into a physical confrontation, his ordeal provides less an instructive adventure than a painful destabilization of self.

Even before he is propositioned, Arnold appears insecure, hurrying as he does to the phone. He seems to feel threatened by the independence of his wife, who customarily phones "late ... after a few drinks--each night when she [is] out of town." Arnold's insecurity is a scaled-down version of Carl's insecurity in "What's in Alaska?" which takes the shape of a pair of eyes--glowing animal eyes--that, embodying his paranoias about the future and about his girlfriend's fidelity, stalk him in a darkened hallway. Carver's protagonists are "creatures in crisis," as Michael Wood writes of this volume; the stories they inhabit, Wood concludes, are "full of menace" precisely because "The expected catastrophe, though absent as crisis or melodrama, is perpetually present as fear." Like Carl and a number of others, Arnold is stalked by fear, though the embodiment of such fear is more concretely manifested for him than for some, appearing as it does in the form of Clara, the wrong number caller, who makes sexual opportunity rise suddenly like a boil on the smooth skin of his sheltered, though not necessary stable, domestic life. Similarly, in "Jerry and Molly and Sam," another male character senses that, thanks to an affair he is having, he is "losing control over everything." Likewise shaken by his caller's advances, Arnold feels his own feeble control slipping away, in this case due not to actual infidelity but to the very thought of it, and to the terrible freedom such possibility implies--a freedom which disorients, releasing one from the comfortable, entrapping bonds of marriage, and which terrifies, allowing one to imagine one's spouse capable of equal freedom.

Appropriately, the greatest erosion of Arnold's self-possession comes with the relinquishing of his name. When Clara asks him his name he replies, "Arnold Breit ... and then quickly add[s], 'Clara Holt. That's nice. But I really think I should hang up now, Miss Holt.'" Realizing that he has voluntarily turned his name over to a stranger, he tries to blot it out of her memory at once, diverting attention to her own name (which doesn't work, of course; Clara's young daughter greets him with his full name when he arrives at their door). Even more strikingly than the waitress in "Fat"--who admits that she has told Rita "too much"--Arnold spreads his already unstable sense of self dangerously thin, and, as Stull observes, tangles "his identity in a web of his own making." In this progressive tangling, Arnold more than once in the story looks "at himself in the mirror" and inventories the eroding of what had been before a relatively secure self. In the final lines of the story, therefore, when the one and only exchange between husband and wife occurs, his wife says, "Arnold? ... You don't sound like yourself."

If the lure of sexual possibility activates in Arnold what Boxer and Phillips call "dissociation"--that "sense of disengagement from one's own identity and life, a state of standing apart from whatever defines the self, or of being unselfed"--then the loss of his name figuratively recapitulates and clinches such dissociation. For Arnold's dissociated cousins in the volume, psychic erosion is even more extreme. In "Collectors," Slater loses not only a letter and the possibility of a job, but also--at the mercy of the man and his vacuum--himself, a transient and precarious self signified by his name on the envelope, which is carted off with the rest of the debris, those "bits and pieces" sealed up in the bowels of the intruder's machine. In "The Father" dissociation is pushed to its expressionistic limit--the story's title figure turns to his family with a face "white and without expression," having been informed that he "doesn't look like anybody" (the next remove from not sounding like oneself).

In the final moments of "Are You a Doctor?" Arnold falls mute. Questioned in a joking way by his wife about his recent whereabouts, he does not respond but instead "remain[s] silent and consider[s] her voice." Arnold's silence is both an intensification and natural result of what has been building and accumulating throughout the story, at least as far as communication is concerned; his reluctant though oddly enticing conversations with Clara, particularly the one taking place in the flesh, have failed miserably, and so by extension have his attempts at communicating with himself. Now, verbal interaction with his wife, whom he doesn't seem to altogether trust, collapses. Like Rita and the talk-spent waitress, he waits; and like Leo in "Jerry and Molly and Sam," Arnold more than once in the story looks "at himself in the mirror" and inventories the erosion of what had been before a relatively secure self. In the final lines of the story, therefore, when the one and only exchange between husband and wife occurs, his wife says, "Arnold? ... You don't sound like yourself."

What he finds is the "human noise" emerging out of silence at the end of "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love," that automatic idle, in the form of a heartbeat, presiding over being after the collapse of language, after dissociation is ruinously complete. Hurrying away earlier from Clara's apartment, he'd wondered about "the other child--the boy. Where was he?" Not just the story's "doctor," Arnold is also the missing boy, himself as much a point of vacancy in the story's psychic economy as the boy is a hole in the structural whole of the narrative. "I'm afraid for the boy," Clara tells him earlier in the day, just before he asks about her husband. Arnold, too, is afraid, shaken by his own ongoing and terrifying self-disintegration, a thing he is beginning to sense but cannot understand.

If Carver "cuts America's heart out," as Gary Fisketjon writes, "and lays it open in a book," then in this world of inexplicable, terrible domesticity, Arnold's fears are everybody's fears. Thanks to the surgical deftness of Carver's hand, in other words, the vacuum at the center of Arnold's world represents, to greater and lesser degrees, the missing essence of us all.

In "What Is It?," one of Carver's darkest, most unsettling stories, sexuality and loss of self are linked in an even more concrete way. In this story, an insolvent man, Leo, waits at home all night in torment while his wife is out "negotiating" a deal on their convertible (and also, we presume, cap the deal by sleeping with the salesman who buys the car). Infidelity, of course, is not an unusual subject in Carver's fiction; it resounds throughout his canon as an obsession. This book treats the subject explicitly in "What Is It?" as well as in the title story and in "Jerry and Molly and Sam." Infidelity crops up again, at least indirectly, in his three other volumes of
In his most graphic demonstration yet, Carver illustrates how menace can lurk in the calmest of relationships for years before finally confirmed as reality—after Ralph wrings a confession out of his spouse—the sudden encroachment of the “unthinkable” upon his life on the part of Marion, his wife, the “certain unthinkable particularities” of which have gnawed at him for years. When possibility is “only a single injury to their marriage” exists first as possibility, taking the form of what he supposes to have been an act of infidelity for instance, or Carl in Wyman is relatively successful and seems content with his life. Still, like a number of other males in the collection—Leo and Arnold, a relatively stable character. It presents an at least temporarily “happy couple,” and the kind of relationship which, with the partial In their misfortunes—if it ever comes, carries few promises. Materially and spiritually, Carver suggests, the forecast is not good.

Carver takes on the subject of infidelity again, providing a fuller psychological treatment than in any other story. Unlike “What Is It?” a story in which we see the inevitable breakdown of a broken man, this story deals with a relatively stable character. It presents an at least temporarily “happy couple,” and the kind of relationship which, with the partial exception of the Millers, emerges nowhere else in the volume. In contrast to Leo, and to a host of Carver’s other characters, Ralph Wyman is relatively successful and seems content with his life. Still, like a number of other males in the collection—Leo and Arnold, for instance, or Carl in “What’s in Alaska?”—Ralph is oddly naive in his dealings with the female sex and is therefore vulnerable. The “only a single injury to their marriage” exists first as possibility, taking the form of what he supposes to have been an act of infidelity on the part of Marion, his wife, the “certain unthinkable particularities” of which have gnawed at him for years. When possibility is confirmed as reality—after Ralph wrings a confession out of his spouse—the sudden encroachment of the “unthinkable” upon his life destabilizes him utterly, throwing him seemingly secure identity, and his entire world, into turmoil.

In his most graphic demonstration yet, Carver illustrates how menace can lurk in the calmest of relationships for years before finally
rising to the surface. More stable than any figure in this volume, Ralph is subjected to the most violent, explosive identity crisis of them all (perhaps because he, unlike others, is capable of comprehending his crisis as such). And, as we have seen again and again in Carver, the crisis hinges on sex. As the story suggests, Marion's admission releases in Ralph another self—a older and more destructive self going by the name of "Jackson," which, for the love of wife-to-be and career, he had earlier suppressed; as Boxer and Phillips observe, Ralph "has pAVED oVer, no rid himself of Jackson, the Dionysian side of him which continues to haunt his conscious mind."27 In the bursting of Ralph's world we see, less obviously, that Marion's "threateningly mysterious sensuality" is associated in his mind with the "squalor and open lust" that appalled him years before in Mexico, where he had a disturbing "vision" of his wife, watching her secretly as she leaned against the railing of a porch. Inexplicably intimidating to him, Marion's "breasts pushing" against her blouse are for Ralph connected to the "great evil pushing at the world," that sense of uncontainability which, as his night-long drunk suggests, is both mysteriously feminine and pregnant with danger.

Ralph's fear of the uncontrollably feminine arises with sporadic intensity during his nightmarish descent into hell (an American neo-realists's version of Joyce's night-town), fear heralded before he leaves by his wife's reference to a trio of exemplary misogynists--Nietzsche, Strindberg, and Mailer—and reinforced progressively by what he sees in hell: pornographic graffiti; visions of Marion in the act of copulation; a "huge neon-lighted clam shell with a man's legs sticking out"; even the sight of a woman tossing her hair, which is as "frightening" to Ralph as anything he has ever seen. But by insisting on his wife's confession, on fueling his personal male erotic nightmare, Ralph is journeying long before he leaves, embarking early on a dangerous descent available to him in the form of language. To Marion such an activity is "just talking," but to Ralph, as the story insists, this is perilous intercourse indeed. Thus as Marion begins dishing out the meat-and-potatoes of her tale, Ralph directs "all his attention into one of the tiny black coaches in the tablecloth," where he sees that

Four tiny white prancing horses pulled each of the black coaches and the figure driving the horses had his arms up and wore a tall hat, and suitcases were strapped down atop the coach, and what looked like a kerosene lamp hung from the side, and if he were listening at all it was from inside the black coach.(234)

Riding through the dark in a coach, Ralph's imagined journey, prefiguring calamity to come on the streets of Eureka, is yet another manifestation of that "great evil" pushing at the seams of the world, and, just as significantly, a response to such evil. A wary participant, a passive listener along for the ride in a "black coach," Ralph unconsciously fashions himself the victim of "evil" coming to him in the form of language. Like Leo--speechless in the end, helplessly "considering"--Ralph is on the road to silence, where words, and the potential horror behind words, can do him no harm. Fittingly, just before Marion begins her story Ralph admits his reservations, telling his wife he'd "just as soon leave it at that," and then tells himself that "it would be silent somewhere if he had not married." Faced with the devastating and contradictory nature of love, and its dire manifestations in discourse, Ralph, like the speaker of "This Word Love," does little more than "Listen"—then suffers for it.

Silence, then, is in a sense the antidote for bad talk. It halts and negates the circumlocutions, those nightmare journeys of potentially destructive conversation. Playing off Hemingway's line, "Will you please please please please please please please be quiet?" (borrowed from a story making a similar statement about the efficacy of talk), Carver's title, and Ralph's repetitions of it, reinforces the notion that "quiet," like sex, is a powerful restorative, counteracting to an extent the machinations of body and tongue. The bathroom, a haven for silence, provides Ralph with temporary though necessary isolation, along with the baptismal effects of water. (He partly succeeds where others have failed: Leo, acting on the same impulse, continually "splashes water on his face" but cannot purge himself of his torments; Jake Barnes, also banged up in the name of love, can't get the bath water to flow.) Ralph runs a bath and actually gets "into the water," itself a positive act and prelude to the greater act of restoration soon available to him in the form of sex. Hence Ralph finds it is "easier to let go a little," and turns to his wife, finally, after she has climbed into bed and silently placated him. "He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep," the story's last sentence reads, "and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him." Through verbal repetition—especially of the gerund—Carver suggests the kinds of possibility residing in the "impossible," emphasizing that the road to recovery is part of the journey, too. He also suggests, ironically, that the remedy for such dis-ease lies in its cause. For Ralph and Marion, sex will now restore, at least in part, what sex and the potential horror behind words, can do him no harm. Fittingly, just before Marion begins her story Ralph admits his reservations, telling his wife he'd "just as soon leave it at that," and then tells himself that "it would be silent somewhere if he had not married." Faced with the devastating and contradictory nature of love, and its dire manifestations in discourse, Ralph, like the speaker of "This Word Love," does little more than "Listen"—then suffers for it.

"Love comforteth," Shakespeare writes, "like sunshine after rain." It is often the case, we should hasten to add, that love, or a version of love, is what brings the rain in the first place. "How should a man act," Ralph asks himself in his distraction, "given these circumstances?"—and then, giving in to love, answers his own question by quietly surrendering himself to that which has been eating him for so long. Ralph's compensation, embodied not only in the form of sexual intimacy but also in the possibility of acceptance and understanding, strikes an affirmative note which is rare to this volume, and which will not emerge again until Cathedral.28 A light note amid a tide of darker ones, it anticipates Carver's later, somewhat more affirmative work, including his revision of "This Word Love," the last stanza of which he altered radically for inclusion in the final volume of poems:

"But this word love—
this word grows dark, grows
heavy and shakes itself, begins
to eat, to shudder and convulse
its way through this paper
until we too have dimmed in
its transparent throat and still
are riven, are glistening, hip and thigh, your
loosened hair which knows
no hesitation.29"

Not willing as he was in the earlier version to merely "Listen" to love's corrosion, the poem's speaker now celebrates love even as he condemns it. The lovers, swallowed and devoured in the maw of love, "are riven" even as they "are glistening," simultaneously torn apart and intimately united in the act of sex. In this sense are Ralph and Toni also "dimmed" in the "transparent throat" of love.
Turning to his wife in the end, Ralph relinquishes himself, like the speaker of the poem, to something far larger than himself or his wife, far more encompassing than their petty acts and words, far greater than his fears. In doing so, Ralph is precursor to a new strain of character in Carver's canon, anticipating characters who, turning up here and there in the last two volumes, persist in their struggles almost to the point of accepting them—characters who, in rare instances, come close to celebrating their struggles, who find comfort in the small, good things of their lives and consolation in the face of an incomprehensible, unfair, brutal world.

"[T]he world is the world," says Stephen Spender, excerpted by Carver in an epigraph to a poem, "And it writes no histories that end in love." Indeed, as Carver's fictive histories attest, the world and its relationships are marked more by love's absence than by love itself. Struck down by love's diseases, battered by impulses as contradictory and powerful as the disorienting world they mirror, Carver's characters are dissociated from themselves, alienated from everybody and everything they know. But despite their individual dissociations and alienations, the characters rarely surrender. "It's their lives they've become uncomfortable with," Carver says in an interview, "lives they see breaking down. They'd like to set things right, but they can't. And usually they do know it ... and after that they just do the best they can." Elsewhere, Carver says, "[I]t's really a question of enduring and abiding," speaking for his characters as well as for himself. Ralph Wyman, the most articulate of Carver's early figures and mouthpiece for a number of others whose questions take the form of half-hearted gestures, endures by shutting up and acting instinctually, realizing that he "did not know what to do ... not just in this, not just about this, today and tomorrow, but every day on earth." Archetypally a survivor, Ralph does the best he can in what is for him an unbearable, "impossible" situation: he makes love to his wife, he abides, and he endures.

Calling himself an "instinctual writer," Carver explains:

> There are certain obsessions that I have and try to give voice to: the relationships between men and women, why we oftentimes lose the things we put the most value on, the mismanagement of our own inner resources. I'm also interested in survival, what people can do to raise themselves up when they've been laid low.

Loss, mismanagement, survival: these are the hard cold facts of Carver's world. It should not be surprising for us, therefore, to find so many of his figures at a loss for words, to see them managing badly with the delimited vocabularies they struggle to master, or reduced to outright speechlessness. Still, silence is more than an outward expression of inner mayhem, more than a personal response, emerging on the level of language, to the chaos of phenomena. Like sex, silence can be medicinal, providing a respite from that ready-made flow of language, which often confuses already confusing circumstances more than it sorts them out. "Talk and love run at odds," Stull writes of Carver's second book of stories, a work that is by comparison far more laconic than his first in both characterization and style, and whose title story ends with a pair of couples sitting speechless in the dark, wearied by their circumlocutions on the subject of love. "Love, or be silent," Shakespeare's Cordelia observes under her breath, insisting, on a similar note, how much more ponderous love is than her tongue.

In a poem appearing nearly a decade after *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, Carver's speaker admits, "There was a time / I would've died for love," but adds, evoking an apocalyptically Yeatsian disorientation, "No more. That center wouldn't hold." In the last stanza of the poem, shaken by memories of old love and thoughts of death, the speaker says, "I find myself, at last, in perfect silence." Lacking this degree of self-possession, Carver's early characters also "find" themselves, or at least make efforts in that direction. Arnold Breit, checking his identity for vital signs, considers his wife's voice but cannot or will not respond; Leo and Ralph, likewise silent considerers, are men whose torments, bad as they are, bring them back to the very source of their troubles—to bed—with markedly varying degrees of relief. Though more extreme, such impulses toward silence are on a par with the waitress's impulse toward talk, with her urge to share her story about the fat man: all are seeking on some level to "find" themselves (in the sense both of encountering and discovering) in the "perfect silence" of understanding, in that ideal and only vaguely imaginable realm of marital complacency where worry and jealousy and self-diminishment hold neither sway nor say. For all of these characters, however—and for most of us, whether alive in the flesh or on the printed page—such silence, such self-assurance, is impossible. But we have to admire them for trying, and to admire Carver for giving them the incentive to persist, often against great odds, in their trials.

**Notes**

2. Stull, *DLB Yearbook* 1988, 206. Citing Camus, Carver refers here to the stories of William Kittredge, his statement appearing in an introduction to Kittredge's *We Are Not In This Together*, ix.
4. *At Night the Salmon Move*, 44.
7. Interview with Mona Simpson, 207.


16. For alternative and equally fascinating possibilities in fictive obesity, see Miller, “Poets of Reality,” 187-89; see also DeMarinis, “Life Between Meals,” in Under the Wheat, 81-101.

17. At Night the Salmon Move, 11.


28. “[A]ctually,” Tess Gallagher informs me, by way of qualification, “it began in What We Talk About, but because of severe editing by Gordon Lish, it did not become visible until Cathedral.”

29. A New Path to the Waterfall, 14.


33. Carver, Interview with Kasia Boddy, 16.


Bibliography


Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2008 Gale, Cengage Learning

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)


Gale Document Number: GALE|H1420078487