

Raymond Carver's Minimalistic Technique at Its Best and Worst: "Everything Stuck to Him" and "So Much Water So Close to Home"

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"Everything Stuck to Him"

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Submerged Menace

Short Story Technique

Omission

I

The critics of Raymond Carver's short stories have paid much attention to the author's oblique way of description, and this tendency seems to have been more pronounced since Carver published *Cathedral*. This is because the critics have become skeptical about the appropriateness of the word "minimalism," the appellation given to Carver's technique in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. To be sure, a close reading of these three collections of short stories suggests that his way of description has not always been unvaried. Rather, it shows an undoubted transition of his writing method.¹ Adam Meyer has succinctly explained this process of change in Carver's techniques: "If we look back over Carver's entire output . . . we see that his career . . . has actually taken on the shape of an hourglass, beginning wide, then narrowing, and then widening out again" (239).

By "the shape of an hour glass," Meyer means "he [Carver] did not start out as a minimalist, and he is one no longer, although he was one for a period of time in between" (240).

Given that Carver has undergone a change in his writing method, it is not so simple a matter to give evidence of what aspects have exactly changed. Looking at his major-press books of stories, only one thing is obvious: the stories written later are much longer than the earlier ones. This fact is quite obvious when we compare his three important major collections of stories published by Vintage Books, 1) *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*, 2) *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and 3) *Cathedral*. In the first collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*, which is 251 pages long, there are 22 stories, and in the second book that has merely 159 pages, 17 stories are included. By contrast, the third collection, *Cathedral*, consists of 228 pages yet contains only 12 stories. The average numbers of pages per each story of these three collections come down to these figures: 1) 11.4 pages, 2) 9.4 pages, 3) 19 pages. This comes across as a remarkable phenomenon, for the themes chosen by the author are almost always failed lives of people "in which divorce, unemployment, boredom, and paranoia exist as part of an everyday landscape: the inversion of the American dream" (Clarke 100). That is, the conflicts he depicted in these collections are invariably of blue-color workers and their households, but, in spite of that, the lengths of the stories have dramatically increased.

Actually, however, there was a small-press book, *Furious Seasons and Other Stories*, published in 1977 between *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. We are tempted to compare the lengths of the stories in this small press-book, too, with the

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stories in major-press books, but we cannot simply do so, because the format of this small-press book is quite different from those of the Vintage editions, defying easy comparison. *Furious Seasons and Other Stories* has 41 lines of words per page, whereas *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* has 32 lines, and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* has merely 30 lines. Roughly speaking, the stories of *Furious Seasons* are by far longer than the ones contained in the other two.

Upon considering the transition in Carver's writing, this small-press book is invaluable because, in this collection, there are two stories that were to be revised and published later in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. These two stories — "Everything Stuck to Him" and "So Much Water So Close to Home" — were rewritten a couple of times each, and the results of these revisions are worth our scrutiny, for one has turned out to be a very well-written story and the other one, a big failure.

2

The original title of "Everything Stuck to Him," as it was published in *Furious Seasons*, was "Distance."² The story begins with a scene in Milan, Italy, where the daughter of a father visits him, urging him to tell her "what it used to be like" (Maryann Burk Carver) when she was still a baby and her parents were a very happy couple, in their teens.³ The father recollects the days gone by and, happy as they were, there were sometimes quarrels between them. "Distance" focuses on one such quarrel which erupts when their baby girl (now the young girl visiting her father in Milan) starts crying in the small hours without any apparent cause. The girl in Milan, now listening to her father tell the episode, finds it very interesting. She has been deeply moved, and asks her father to tell more, but he shrugs, just saying "things change."

This is a good story with a dual structure — now and twenty years ago — and both times imply ample background hidden between the lines. When they were young, the father and mother must have quarreled often, for it is often the case with young people who are poor and haven't been married long. This, in turn, lets the reader imagine various things about their own married life, which is why this is a good story. This, however, is not free from some weaknesses. If this aspires to be a very well-written short story, the weaknesses have to be redressed somehow.

Subsequently, "Distance" was revised and appeared entitled as "Everything Stuck to Him" in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Roughly calculating, "Distance" has been reduced by 40 percent and turned into a new, quite moving story, "Everything Stuck to Him," which presents us with a world far deeper than the original version did. That this revised edition has turned out far better has been achieved by excising redundant words, sentimental phrases, and episodes that have little to do with the focus of the story. This has made full use of "submerged menace" (Campbell 134) which could trigger the reader's imagination far more widely and deeply than its previous version.

In the first version, for example, the episode between the young husband and Carl hampers the reader's imagination, distracting the focus from the young couple's feelings to the young husband's relationship with Carl. On top of that, the young couple's feelings sound a little exaggerated to the reader because of the sentimental wording that appears several times in the story. In the second version, the dual structure, which stimulates the reader's imagination about now and 20 years ago, has remained intact even after Carver's heavy excision.

The final scene in Milan is very brief, yet very evocative. Although the daughter urges her father to tell more, he, just saying "things change," (*What We Talk About* 134) is seeing outside, looking at nothing and is sinking in his deep reminiscences. The implications are these: he has been separated with his old wife for many years; his daughter's visit has caused him to remember

a lot of things in his old married life; the daughter might have lived part or all of her life with her mother, but, without doubt, she has heard little about her parents' life directly from her mother. These also make the reader imagine many other things. Have the mother and daughter been on good terms with each other, or not? How about the father-daughter relationship? What has the father done to make his living?; etc., etc. The "menace" lies here as Carver said:

The world is a menacing place for many of the people in my stories, yes. The people I've chosen to write about do feel menace, and I think many, if not most, people feel the world is a menacing place Menace does contain, for me at least, more interesting possibilities to explore. (*Conversations* 102)

The daughter has been impressed by the father's recollections, which has just triggered off her imagination about her parents' life, because he obviously seems to have many more to tell. And how ironical human relations are! Where have their love feelings gone? Irony, if any story succeeds in evoking emotion, is a quite effective technique any good story should be equipped with. Since the girl seems to be a stranger in Milan (for, later, the father takes her out to see around the town), it is evident that she has not lived with her father. This is the minimalistic technique at its best. "Everything Stuck to Him" is in every sense a masterpiece of short story.

3

Now, let us look at the other story, "So Much Water So Close to Home." This was first published in *Furious Seasons and Other Stories*, and then, after heavy excision, appeared once again in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, with the same title retained. The plot in both versions is basically the same but the first version is much longer than the second. And it was published for the third time in *Fires*, reverting to its original length and tone with a few alterations made to the first version. The versions to be examined here are its original one that appeared in *Furious Seasons and Other Stories* and the second one in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

This story, too, centers on a conflict between husband and wife that takes place after Claire's husband comes back from his fishing in the Naches River with his three friends. The party finds a woman's dead body floating naked in the river but, since they had walked a long distance to the river, they did not want to walk back several miles to the nearest available pay phone to report the finding to the police. On the morning after he comes back from his fishing, Stuart reveals to her what had happened in the mountains. She is astonished at what Stuart and his friends did at the camping site because she cannot believe any person can be so callous to the victim of such a tragedy. The husband's behavior has opened a chasm that separates the relationship between husband and wife.

Upon reading "So Much Water So Close to Home," however, the reader gets an impression as if it were part of a novel. Perhaps this impression comes from Carver's meticulous ways in describing what Claire and Stuart are feeling at each stage of the development. Carver depicts how the discrepancy between their sensibilities has arisen between Stuart and Claire, and how the four men spent the night at the camping ground feeling quite precarious, but playing cards and drinking, speaking at the same time of "vulgar or dishonest escapades out of their past" (*Furious Seasons* 44). These not only help the reader understand the workings of the characters' minds in each situation, but also advance the main plot quite effectively.

Much of these detailed descriptions, however, were omitted when the story was revised for

publishing in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. One example of such omission can be seen in the first paragraph where Claire has not yet heard from Stuart what the trouble is that seems to be eating him. She feels in the first version, "Something has come between us though he would like to believe otherwise" (*Furious Seasons* 41), but this important clue was obliterated completely in the second.

In the first version, the scene where Stuart confesses the incident to Claire in the morning is rather long, at about 70 lines. And here, Claire learns to her astonishment what the men did, or did not do, for that matter, in the mountains. Stuart's explanation fills in the missing information for Claire, who now understands why Stuart has been cross on that morning. This also provides the reader with the background information of the trouble the fishing party has fallen in.

With this as a start, Claire splits up with Stuart psychologically and physically as well, for, she begins to sleep separately from him. And the reader learns how the gap has now become difficult for her to surmount, and how Stuart is unable to fathom Claire's displeasure. Claire's exclamatory question: "It isn't true,' I said. 'You didn't leave her there like that?'" (*Furious Seasons* 45) proclaims her sensibility to be much more delicate, sympathetic, and understanding than Stuart's. In the first version, the reader can clearly understand at this point the reason Claire has begun to hate him, but this has also been left out from the second version. She hates him now but, at the same time, she also understands the need to control her temper: "I must not dwell on this any longer. I must get over it; put it out of sight, out of mind, etc., and 'go on'" (*Furious Seasons* 42), but she cannot contain her feelings and, in a fit of anger, she violently sweeps aside the dishes on the drainboard. With these descriptions excised, the only part that has remained in the second version of this scene is this: "[She] rake[s] [her] arm across the drainboard and send[s] the dishes across the floor" (*What We Talk About* 80). How can the reader understand her intricate feelings with these clues omitted?

This description of her split mind in the first version gives this story another depth that helps the reader understand Claire's mental sufferings. Carver, putting emphasis on this ambivalence of hers, italicized this passage: "*Nothing will be any different. We will go on and on and on and on. We will go on even now, as if nothing had happened*" (*Furious Seasons* 48). These were also omitted completely in the second version.

Claire decides to take their son, Dean, to Stuart's mother's home. The reason Claire begins to harbor so strong a repugnance to Stuart comes from her identification with the victim. When she was still a high school girl, another girl named Arlene Hubly, who went to the same high school as Claire did, was killed near Claire's town. This is why Claire attends the funeral service for the victim. If this kind of information is kept away from the reader, how can he understand Claire's sympathetic feelings toward the victim?

Adam Meyer, quoting the same line from the opening paragraph of the story as I did — "Something has come between us though he would like to believe otherwise" (*Furious Seasons* 41)—, concludes: "Its elimination in the second version leaves us unsure of the real motivations of the characters, thus diminishing our understanding of what is actually going on and, consequently, our concern for the people involved" (243).

The second version has been so drastically excised, the reader has enormous difficulty understanding the background of the descriptions. Because of this, the menace between husband and wife that Carver had intended to install in the story has been toned down to just a mild disagreement between the two and, in accordance with it, this has resulted in an incomprehensible, lukewarm short story. This is Carver's minimalistic technique gone awry.

4

Both "Everything Stuck to Him" and "So Much Water So Close to Home" started as close-knit, well-written stories when they were first published. But as each went through their own stages of rewriting and republishing, "Everything Stuck to Him" has reached one peak of effectiveness of menace in the second version, whereas "So Much Water So Close to Home" has plunged to the depths of the valley in the second version (though it surfaced up to its comfortable level in the third version). This begs the question: What is the difference between these two types of omission?

The omission in the former story has been well exercised with its purpose kept intact, and it still maintained the "menace" of the story to a great effect. The omission in the latter story, on the other hand, was so excessive that the remaining descriptions were mainly only outward appearances of the characters, confusing the reader to a great extent and obscuring the point of the story. Here, the reader has been unable to fathom the depth of the background of Claire's feelings, nor has he been able to understand the separate feelings between the couple. This incomprehension on the part of the reader culminates especially when he has come to the end of the story where Claire acquiesces in Stuart's physical approach by unbuttoning her jacket herself, saying: "Before Dean comes. Hurry" (*What We Talk About* 88).

Notes

1. Raymond Carver's major publications of stories are in this order: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976); *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981); *Cathedral* (1983); *Fires* (1983); *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). The last book is a collection of the short stories he selected from all the stories he wrote. The "Editor's Note" to this book goes like this: "The stories in this collection are arranged, generally, in chronological order. A number of them have been revised for this edition, and in a few cases titles have been changed."

2. I have already analyzed fully the merits of "Everything Stuck to Him" and some blemishes of "Distance." See my "Raymond Carver's 'Submerged Menace' in 'Everything Stuck to Him,'" *The Bulletin of Joetsu University of Education* (Vol. 27).

3. Maryann Burk Carver was Raymond Carver's first wife. "What It Used to Be Like" is the title of her recollections about her life with Raymond Carver.

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