

Raymond Carver's Art of Fiction and Gordon Lish's Excision

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KEY WORDS

“What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”	“Beginners”
“Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”	Implication
Submerged Menace	Excision

1

Raymond Carver has been deemed to be an exquisitely original short story writer since his first collection of stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* (1976), and his second one, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), were published. Of these two publications, the second one enjoyed especially wider recognition and greater critical acclaim across the United States as a monumental collection of minimalistic artistry. Many of the stories included in these depict characters stuck in the mire of extreme poverty and/or alcoholism, and they are often on the brink of separation because of infidelity and/or excessive drinking. The narrators, however, do not explain plainly the characters' critical situations and their intentions of actions; they are quite often concealed from the reader. Told with sheer objectivity and without the characters' emotional involvement, the point of view is always placed close to the main characters.

Carver found the subjects for his stories from his immediate experiences of life he had led with his former wife. They read as if nothing worth mentioning happened in their lives but small events or quarrels. However, in the background of trifle happenings in each story lurks something ominous that threatens to open fissure in the seemingly calm life of the central characters. For the ominous atmosphere to be felt by the reader without fail, Carver chose a method that makes the best use of omission, rather than conventional ways of detailed description.

His technique of omission utilized for his purpose is especially characteristic of abrupt termination of the flow of events at the end of a story, forcing the reader to look for a reasonable course of development that ought to have concluded the story. The void created in this way is the blank where the reader is tempted to create his own image and meaning of the story. When any meaning is successfully found in the mind of the reader, the story turns out more persuasive than when just explained in so many words by the narrator. If not so successful, this will often cause not a little perplexity to the reader, for Carver's omission is quite often so daring, bold, and ambiguous, and the reader is at a loss how to understand the point of the story.

The same is true with many of the short stories included in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* with the reader feeling this kind of dismay at the end of each story. However, the last story of this volume, “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”, is much longer and descriptions are more elaborate and explanatory than the others. Quite different from the other stories, “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”

runs its course neatly up to the end until the husband, who had felt betrayed by his wife's improper relationship with another man and left the house for the night, comes back to be united with his family again. Showing the central figure's situation and the ins and outs of his feelings, the story develops forward, reaching the end as naturally as a river finally flows into the sea. The experience is surely sour for him but he is not completely without happiness because of his wife's invariable affection for him and his love for their children. If this story had been written in the same manner as the other stories were done in the same volume, the ending ought to have been so different as to leave the reader astray by the void that suddenly appears before him. This story is written in the way that the reader can feel the husband's shock, as well as the fear the wife has of the revelation of her adultery. And there is omission well prepared for the reader to a good effect. He gets the impact of the seriousness as the wife's confessions change in accordance with her husband's persistent succession of inquiries. This technique is what Carver used quite often throughout his career as a writer.

So, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" is entertaining, and the sour feelings both husband and wife embrace are easy to imagine, whereas, in the other stories in the same volume, understanding the meanings of the stories is not an easy task to do. This difference might explain some important aspect of Carver's way of writing stories.

2

The two collections of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* were applauded as the hallmark of minimalism, and Carver as the forefront of minimalistic writer. Minimalism deals with minute happenings in a quite limited setting, and strives to describe situations of the characters that look calm on the surface, thus implying much between the lines and deepening the image of the background of the story.¹ Carver avoids direct mentioning of the characters' crises such as infidelity, divorce, and distress caused by alcoholism, dire poverty, etc. Instead, he implies them and calls the cause of these anxieties "menace." The reader feels this sense of menace more intensely when he finds it himself, than when he is given an explanation for it. The omitted part motivates the reader's imagination and this technique is what Carver makes use of to a great degree in his stories.

This artistry is less obvious in Carver's third collection of stories, *Cathedral*, than the previous two. In this, descriptions of scenes and feelings of the characters are easier to understand and more meticulous, taking the place of oblique way of description utilized in the first two collections. So, critics believed Carver had changed his writing method from oblique way to direct, plain way of description. Adam Meyer has once termed this change of Carver's technique as "like an hourglass," and by this he meant that Carver had started at first from writing fully as he did in his earliest stories of *Furious Seasons and Other Stories*, which had been published by a small-press publisher before he came to be known in the world, and, going through the years of oblique way of writing in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, he came back once again to his former mode of writing in full in *Cathedral*.²

These major changes were, at first, thought by the critics to have been initiated by Carver himself, but later, it was found that these were rather his editor's manipulations in his course of editing. When Carver was still unknown in the literary world, Gordon Lish encouraged him to write and send stories to Lish who was at that time an editor at *Esquire* (Sklenicka 147 ff.). There is no doubt that Carver was greatly indebted to Lish for having attained a status as a well-known short story writer, but Lish

had done more than what he should have done as an editor. *The New Yorker* (Dec. 24&31, 2007) carried a feature story titled, "Rough Crossings: the Cutting of Raymond Carver," which revealed how Lish had edited and excised many parts from Carver's original manuscript of a short story. Changing its title from "Beginners" to "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," he added his own sentences in Carver's manuscript. The article not only included all of the original story, "Beginners," but also Carver's letter to Lish, dated July 8th, 1980, soliciting Lish painfully to postpone the publication of the excessively edited story. And there inserted in the article is also a shocking photograph of the last page of Carver's manuscript. This shows Lish's audacity to cut Carver's original ending using a big cross covering the last full page of the manuscript. Lish the editor had apparently had the upper hand over Raymond Carver the story writer.

Compared with each other, "Beginners" and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" are quite different in essence. First, in "Beginners," the emphasis is put on the old couple's life lived to the full, but in the other version, the description of their life has been truncated with the stress put on the four characters discussing the topic. Secondly, the names of the main characters are altered, but, for what purposes did Lish change the names and what significance do these alterations give to "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love"?

Thirdly, in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the verb "said" is dominantly used for reporting the characters' messages. Lish has avoided using suggestive verbs and preferred the ones that only report the fact; thanks to these objective verbs, the reader, relying upon his own intuition, tries to understand the speaker without bias.

Fourth, when Carver uses long sentences in "Beginners," Lish often omits them like the following:

She was a bone-thin woman with a pretty face, dark eyes, and brown hair that hung down her back. She liked necklaces made of turquoise, and long pendant earrings. ~~She was fifteen years younger than Herb, had suffered periods of anorexia, and during the late sixties, before she'd gone to nursing school, had been a dropout, a "street person" as she put it. Herb sometimes called her, affectionately, his hippie.~~ ("Beginners" 927)

Here, Lish has cut the last two sentences, by which he left out Teresa's age, her medical history, explanation about the years she had been "a street person," and the direct expression of Herb's affection for her. This kind of excision was Lish's usual practice of deletion.

Fifth, Lish has not only omitted parts of Carver's story but also rearranged Carver's words, and sometimes exchanged them for his own, using shorter, simple sentences. In trying to let Nick and Laura know what has become of Carl, for example, Teresa tells how Carl drank rat poison to kill himself: "They took him to the hospital in Santa Fe where we lived then and they saved his life, and his gums separated" (929). Lish has rewritten it like this: "They took him to the hospital in Santa Fe. That's where we lived then, about ten miles out. They saved his life. But his gums went crazy from it" (*What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* 139). By changing a long, complex sentence into a chain of short, simple sentences, objectivity is enhanced and, with emotional nuances decreasing to a minimal degree, the cool tone of the narration dominates.

Sixth, Carver's descriptions are elaborate and sometimes repetitious. Laura, after hearing from Herb how violently Carl exhibited his affection to Teresa, displays her relationship with Nick in sweet words that sound like adolescents'. "We get along really well, I think. We like doing things together, and neither of us has beaten up on the other yet, thank God. Knock on wood. I'd say we're pretty

happy. I guess we should count our blessings” (931). These sentences markedly show an aspect of Carver’s characteristics, but Lish has totally removed them from Carver’s original story. Sometimes Carver’s sentences are surely duplicate in meaning, but not always unnecessary, for ordinary people do not always say to others only the words necessary and precise, but repetitions and redundant expressions are often quite natural. For Lish, these things were what he could not accept; redundancy, repetition, and emotional revelation were against his rules of aesthetics.

3

The differences between “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” and the other stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* can be seen in the same light as those seen between “Beginners” and its Lish-edited version, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” The stories except “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” have in common the following characteristics: the frequent use of the reporting verb, “said”; dominant use of short sentences; minimal explanations to help the reader understand the characters’ intentions. Others are these: psychological explanations and emotional descriptions are sparingly used, so that the objectivity is highly maintained throughout the stories; words or sentences repeated for emphasis, or similar in meaning are few; omission of background knowledge is frequent; stories end abruptly, open-ended, with the reader left feeling troubled, which gives the reader a mysterious impression that there must be something secret somewhere, though, intentionally veiled, it cannot be named easily.

When Raymond Carver was asked about his way of ending stories, he answered:

[Interviewer] Your stories don’t tend to have the “shape” of the classically rendered story: the introduction/conflict/development/resolution structure of so much fiction. Instead there is often a static or ambiguous, open-ended quality to your stories.

[Carver] The writer’s job is not to provide conclusions or answers. . . . I want to make certain my readers aren’t left feeling cheated in one way or another when they’ve finished my stories. (*Conversations* 111)

Carver’s answer to the interviewer should not be taken as true to his beliefs, for, as we have already seen, “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” does not fall in this category; it has “the introduction/conflict/development/resolution structure.” Carver did not tell the truth nor was he willing to reveal what Lish had done to his original manuscripts, because Lish was the person who had helped him out from obscurity, when he was struggling as a would-be writer in the depths of poverty. In the letter to Lish, dated July 8, 1980, he writes:

And I’m not unmindful of the fact of my immense debt to you, a debt I can simply never, never repay. This whole new life I have, so many of the friends I now have, this job up here, everything, I owe to you for ‘Will You Please.’ You’ve given me some degree of immortality already. You’ve made so many of the stories in this collection better, far better than they were before.

Comparison of the original story, “Beginners,” published in *The New Yorker* (and later included in *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*) with “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” included in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, sheds some light on “Will You Please Be Quiet,

Please?" in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Although both "Beginners" and "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?", which was selected and included in *The Best American Short Stories: 1967*, were much excised at various parts, the basic story line of "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" of *The Best American Short Stories: 1967* remains fairly intact in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* On the other hand, "Beginners," after it was blatantly deleted at many parts, was included in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. The problem does not stop there, for the very best part of the story, that is, the true relationship of love seen in the old couple has been mutilated and, as such, carried in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Although what Gordon Lish might have thought about his own "editing" of "Beginners" is what we should speculate about, it cannot be denied that Lish has destroyed the literary value of "Beginners" but not the value of "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?"

Notes

1 Minimalism: "... equanimity of surface, 'ordinary' subjects, recalcitrant narrators and deadpan narratives, slightness of story, and characters who don't think out loud" (Campbell 146). / "These stories [minimalistic ones] are often about the many ways people communicate various feelings without ever speaking the exact words, as well as how people hardly ever say what they really mean or really feel, but rather rely upon ready phrases, expected responses, innuendos, or euphemism to say it outright, or, in the words of Emily Dickinson, to 'Tell the Truth—but tell it slant'" (Hallett 493). / "The minimalism, as such, is based upon an absolute concern with the implications of a single mood: a space of habitation (and consciousness) where the syntax is as much concerned with the silent as it is with the spoken" (Trussler 25).

2 Adam Meyer says: "If we look back over Carver's entire output . . . we see that his career, rather than following an inverted pyramid pattern, has actually taken on the shape of an hourglass, beginning wide, then narrowing, and then widening out again" (239).

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