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"Nobody Said Anything" Issues of Communication in the Short Stories of Raymond Carver

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Issues of Communication in the Short Stories of Raymond Carver

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Supplementary Readings

Hemingway, The First Forty-Nine.

Franz Kafka, Das Urteil und Andere Erzählungen ("The Judgement and Other Stories).

Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." (And to a lesser extent: Ferdinand de Saussure, "The Object of Study").

John Cheever, The Brigadier and the Golf Widow.

Bobbie Ann Mason, Shiloh and Other Stories.

The title of this paper is also the title of one of Raymond Carver's stories, and it represents well a theme that is central to all of his work: the problems of communication. The characters who inhabit his stories often find themselves in situations where communication seems essential and desired, yet where they are unable to understand or verbalize their feelings. Language fails them. Because of this, in the few instances where any sort of successful communication is achieved, it is almost always a non-verbal connection-- a physical gesture such as two lovers who have been quarreling finally turning to each other in bed. However, such moments of successful communication seldom occur. Instead Carver's characters usually remain bewildered and without words or actions to satisfactorily articulate their feelings.

Because the language of the characters is also the language of the text, the reader is also affected by the problems of articulation and communication. Writing itself may be seen as communication between author and reader, and style the manner in which a writer goes about communicating. Carver himself has said that there "ought to be a compact between writer and reader. Writing, or any form of artistic endeavor, is not just expression, it's communication"(1).

The style with which Carver communicates is marked by an absence of explication and his writing is dramatic: he shows, he doesn't tell. His narrators are never omniscient and they lack interpretive abilities, often seeming hardly able to describe action accurately let alone judge it. Their use of colloquial, elliptical language enhances the lack of interpretive guides

within the texts. Further, although Carver's stories pose interpretive problems, they lack any sort of authorial comment or interpretation.

In addition, Carver's stories are very short. The texts are often fragments of longer stories which start abruptly, without introductory scenes, and lack conclusive endings. Sometimes the stories are groups of fragments-- physically and chronologically separated paragraphs-- that the reader is left to fill out or connect. Thus Carver's stories are both verbally and formally reticent.

Through this particular style, Carver controls the reader's ability to interpret and thereby creates a similarity between the experience of the reader and the characters. The reader usually doesn't reach, or is kept from reaching, a level of understanding greater than that of the characters within the story-- kept from solving the ambiguities that afflict the characters. When the characters fail to make sense of their lives or each other, Carver keeps the reader from making clear sense of the text. Through stylistic control of the reader's relationship to the text, he creates a textual, readerly experience that mimics the experience of the characters within the text.

In this paper I plan to divide my consideration of the different levels of communication in Carver's work into several categories, realizing that these categories overlap and are in no way mutually exclusive. First, I will consider Carver's characters, what might be called communication within the story, or communication as theme. Second, I will specifically look at the narrator, who is both character (and therefore a part of the

issues of communication within the story) and communication link between the the text and the reader. Finally I will address how narrative point of view and other aspects of Carver's style, such as form and structure, affect communication from text to reader by controlling the reading process and the reader's ability to produce meaning-- to conclusively and convincingly interpret Carver's stories.

THE CHARACTERS

> "I don't have anything to say. I feel all out of words inside." (2)

As this speaker in the story "Gazebo" illustrates, the characters in Carver's stories fail to use language effectively and often remain unable to communicate with other characters. This inability to communicate despite the desire and often strong need to do so is the central dilemma that Carver's characters face and a central theme in Carver's writing. It causes both isolation and a lack of understanding between characters. I will use the concept of "communication" here and throughout the paper loosely, to entail more than a one-sided transmission of words or actions. Here, I wish to use the term to represent a more reciprocal process: one character's attempts to connect with another character and make him or herself not just heard, but understood.

In her review of <u>What We Talk About When We Talk About Love</u>, Vivian Gornick correctly observes that Carver's stories are "saturated in a wistful longing for an ideal tender connection that never was and never can be"(3). Irving Howe echoes this

sentiment in his review of Cathedral, stating that: "That is just what Mr. carver's characters don't have, the solace of 'communal grief,' or indeed the solace of communal anything"(4). Therefore, in writing of communication, I wish to stress the interconnectedness of this inability to "connect" or have "communal" experience with the failure of communication. While most Carver stories demonstrate this failure, they imply that with successful communication things would be better and that the "communal" might be achieved, and in those stories where communication is successful, this is indeed the case.

The failure of Carver's characters to communicate occurs in several ways. Sometimes they are unable to make themselves understood because they cannot successfully articulate what they feel or think through words or actions. Other times they themselves appear unable to understand or mentally articulate the significance of that which they are trying to communicate to others and therefore fail in their attempts. A character in "Why Don't You Dance" illustrates both kinds of failed communication as she tries to explain the overwhelming significance of an event she has experienced.

> "The guy was about middle-aged. All his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my God. Don't laugh. He played us these records. Look at this record-player. The old guy gave it to us. All these crappy records. Will you look at this shit?"
>
> She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying. (WHAT 9-10)

In this passage, although the speaker feels something strong, she is unable to articulate it successfully. She "tries" to get it "talked out," but then must "quit trying." Further, although all

she does is recount the events that occurred, her choppy speech suggests a desperate struggle to figure out and convey the significance of these events. It seems that her inability to understand or define the significance of these events for herself prevents her from successfully communicating the significance-- "getting it talked out"-- to the people around her.

While these problems are faced by all Carver characters, it is significant that many of the characters and situations he describes exemplify the problems of communication in an augmented manner. The story "Cathedral" deals with the interaction of an ignorant narrator and a blind man. "Dummy" is largely about a mute man, "Dummy," whose condition prevents him and the other characters from communicating with and understanding each other. In "Careful," the alcoholic protagonist's clogged ear is clearly a symbol of the problems of listening and communication present in the story.

In addition, Carver often presents us with characters whose lives are in transition and who, therefore, feel bewildered and unable to understand or communicate. Families and relationships break up. Alcohol often compounds their inabilities to comprehend. Yet these situations do not explain the characters' communication problems (just as saying that the characters are financially struggling members of the working class does not). Instead, they are devices Carver uses in order to illustrate or highlight the larger human problems of communication, connection and understanding, problems that transcend simple explanation. It is not as important to identify the causes of the situations as

it is to realize that the characters and situations described are connected to the problems of communication.

In "What's in Alaska," for instance, although all the characters smoke marijuana and remain under its influence for the duration of the story, it would belittle the story to attribute all the communication problems to this factor. Instead, the smoking is used to illuminate a more general confusion that afflicts the characters.

Throughout the story the conversation moves erratically between completely trivial issues and the important issue of whether or not one of the couples should move to Alaska. At one point, the characters talk about whether or not they are going to drink some cream soda followed by the sudden interjection:

> "We might go to Alaska," Jack said.
> "Alaska?" Carl said. "What's in Alaska? What would you do up there?"
> "I wish we could go someplace," Helen said.
> "What's wrong with here?" Carl said. "What would you guys do in Alaska? I'm serious. I'd like to know."
> Jack put a potato chip in his mouth and sipped his cream soda. "I don't know. What did you say?"
> After a while Carl said, "What's in Alaska?"
> "I don't know," Jack said. (5)

Shortly after this, Carl says, "I know what would taste good and that's some cream soda," so that the conversation moves from cream soda to the prospect of changing one's life completely and then back to cream soda again. The important question about moving to Alaska gets lost in the cream soda and must be repeated, but even then remains unanswered. The conversation doesn't move anywhere; the characters fail to communicate with each other. In addition, each person is evidently in his or her own world, following his or her own line of thinking and

orientation in time, making any substantive communication impossible and contributing to Jack's isolation, with which the story ends. This sense of isolation in Carver's stories is the recurrent effect of the inability to communicate.

The problems of communication are evident even in the title of the story "Nobody Said Anything." Here again Carver chooses a character and a situation that typify the isolation and confusion that most of his characters feel. The protagonist is a teenaged boy in the middle of puberty whose parents fight constantly and whose brother doesn't seem to care about him. He avoids some of the problems of reality by indulging in a private world of sexual fantasy.

As the story progresses, he skips school and goes fishing. When he returns home with a trout that he has caught, he hears his parents in the middle of a vicious argument. He enters and shows his parents his fish. It's a desperate attempt to communicate-- to express his wish that they stop fighting and that they acknowledge and appreciate him. Here (as is the case in many Carver stories) he tries to use both words and actions to facilitate understanding, but his attempts fail.

> I opened the back door. I started grinning. I said, "You won't believe what I caught at Birch Creek. Just look. Look here. Look at this. Look what I caught."
> My legs shook. I could hardly stand...
>
> I said, "But look, Dad. Look what it is."
> He said, "I don't want to look."
> I said, "It's a gigantic summer steelhead from Birch Creek. Look! Isn't he something? It's a monster! I chased him up and down the creek like a madman!" My voice was crazy but I could not stop. (WHERE 20)

His repeating of the word "look," his shaking, and the fact that although his voice is crazy he cannot stop shows the urgency of

his desire and need for his words to be understood-- for his communication to be received. Yet when the story ends, his parents deny him this connection and he is left alone on the porch with his fish. Here again, the result of the failed communication is isolation.

Many of Carver's stories deal especially with communication problems between married couples. In fact, separations and disparate points of view between sexual partners directly or indirectly inform the problems of communication in almost all of Carver's stories. The marital problems of the narrator's parents in the previously discussed story lie behind the isolation and inability to understand with which the story ends. In "Why Don't You Dance," the fact that the the young couple receives their free furniture from a man whose wife has just left him lurks in the background (and presumably in the back of the woman's mind as she tries "talk out" the experience).

In many stories marital problems lie in the foreground and are more directly connected to the failure of communication. In "The Student's Wife," for example, the wife expresses a need to talk to and be comforted by her husband before they fall asleep. He doesn't respond to this need or understand it, and she, remaining awake, suffers a breakdown because they don't communicate with each other. The result of this undesired isolation (again the effect of the failure to communicate) is that the sunrise she experiences becomes "terrible," and the story closes with the wife's desperate attempt to communicate to an absent God the desire for the return of communication between

her husband and herself:

> She wet her lips with a sticking sound and got down on her knees. She put her hands out on the bed.
> "God," she said. "God, will you help us, God?" she said.
> (WHERE 43)

In the words "will you help us?" she intimates the breakdown of the marriage which is implicitly connected with the breakdown of communication in the story and which results in the terrifying and nameless isolation that she feels.

The story "The Ducks" also binds failed communication to the problems in a marriage. Here's a typical passage:

> "What's the matter? Don't you feel good," he said.
> "I feel all right." She went back into the kitchen and shut the door and looked at him through the window. "I just hate to have you gone all the time. It seems like you're gone all the time," she said to the window. (6)

Again, this couple clearly doesn't understand each other's needs. Instead of communicating with her husband, the wife is both physically and mentally separated from him as she watches him through the window and tells the window what she needs to tell him.

While the previously discussed stories connect typical Carver situations such as marital problems and isolation to the common theme of the failure to communicate, some of his stories seem to be specifically about communication. "One More Thing," "A Serious Talk" and "Cathedral" are three such stories. In these stories, the characters' inability to express themselves verbally not only reflects their isolation and disillusionment, but also leads to an accentuation on nonverbal communication. Unable to express themselves with words, they must resort to physical gestures.

The nature of the nonverbal in these stories differs. In "One More Thing" (and in Carver's earlier and more pessimistic stories in general), the nonverbal consists of violent acts that betray the frustration of the characters, and does nothing to help resolve their problems. However, in later stories such as "Cathedral," the characters' nonverbal actions become effective substitutes for the absent verbal, and a true means of communication and connection. Since the characters achieve a unity and understanding through their successful connection, these stories are consequently more optimistic.

"One More Thing" is an example of a story about the failure of verbal communication in which the nonverbal actions only express frustration and fail to replace the lack of verbal communication. The story begins with a family of three, the alcoholic father, L.D., and the daughter arguing about whether or not alcoholism starts in the brain. They each think the other is "crazy" and refuse to come to an agreement. Even from the beginning the story focuses on L.D.'s verbal incompetence which makes him resort to violent actions.

> "That's crazy!" L.D. said. He hit the table with the flat of his hand. The ashtray jumped. His glass fell on its side and rolled off. "You're crazy, Rae! Do you know that?" (WHAT 156)

Because he can't argue effectively with words (he is only able to repeat, "you're crazy") he resorts to making his point with violence-- by knocking things around. When L.D.'s wife, Maxine, tells him that she has decided that he should move out of the house, he doesn't even attempt to reply. Instead, he takes a jar of pickles from the table and throws them through the kitchen

window.

From this point on, he seems intent on articulating his bitterness to his wife and daughter, yet each time he opens his mouth to speak he is only able to repeat some variation of the phrase, "I'm going. I'm leaving this nuthouse." He says this (and little else) in various ways about nine times within two pages. These repetitions indicate both a desire to say something important, and the speaker's inability to verbalize this important statement.

Before L.D. goes to pack his things, the narrator tells us that he "slammed down his hand on the table. He kicked back his chair," which again is a physical expression of what he can't communicate verbally.

He seems almost to be aware of his own failure to say what he wants to when he tells them, "I don't know what else to say except I guess I'll never see you again," and, "I'm going, that's all I can say"(159). Finally, the last two lines of the story typify the problem of so many of Carver's characters which is the desire to communicate that remains unrealized.

> He said, "I just want to say one more thing."
> But then he could not think what it could possibly be.
> (WHAT 159)

These lines also indicate the further problem characteristic of Carver's characters which is the inability to translate feelings into words. L.D. is both unable to communicate with the others (unable to speak) and unable to resolve the moment within himself (unable to figure out what to say).

The story "A Serious Talk" operates similarly. A man goes to see his wife and children in order to celebrate christmas but he

realizes that the real celebration is being put off until he leaves and his wife's boyfriend arrives. Disturbed by this, he says nothing but instead dangerously overloads the fireplace with wax logs, watching until they begin to flame up, takes all his wife's pies and leaves. Like L.D., he expresses his bitterness through actions rather than through words. The next day he visits his wife in order to have a "serious talk"-- to try to interact verbally. But it never happens. Although we are told that "there were things he wanted to say, grieving things, consoling things, things like that"(WHAT 111), instead of saying these things, he cuts her telephone cord while she is on the phone in an attempt to let this action speak for the things he can't say. Although it is clear that he wishes to make himself understood (say "grieving" and "consoling things"), his actions sever this possibility. Like L.D., he resorts to actions which fail to take the place of the communicative abilities he lacks and fail to adequately represent the words which the reader knows he wants to say. Further, while it is clear that he wishes to communicate with his wife, his inability to do so maintains his isolation and separation from her.

In contrast, the characters in "Cathedral" use nonverbal behavior to successfully communicate and connect with each other when their language fails. Carver's use of a blind man who interacts with a sighted yet ignorant narrator deliberately emphasizes the communication problem with which the story begins. The process of successful communication between the narrator and the blind man starts slowly at the story's beginning and

increases to its ultimate fulfillment at the end. Significantly, it mirrors an enlightenment of the narrator whose assumptions about what it means to be blind, and of the blind man's inability to communicate, are upset. The narrator's willingness to learn and his decision to make a real effort to communicate facilitate the ultimate achievement of his communication with the blind man, and the new hope he finds in life results from this successful communication.

The narrator, waiting for his wife to return from the train station with her blind friend, confesses: "My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed"(7). He finds the fact that the blind man could have been married to someone he never saw "beyond [his] understanding." "Imagine a woman who could never see herself the way she was seen in the eyes of her loved one"(C 213). He doesn't understand how such communication is possible. He feels that the differences between the blind and the sighted make communication between them impossible.

Then, when he finally sees the blind man, he is shocked by his appearance. "This blind man, feature this, he was wearing a full beard! A beard on a blind man! Too much, I say"(C 214). Further, he is surprised to see that the blind man, Robert, smokes, because he remembers having read that blind people don't smoke since they can't see the smoke they exhale. His expectations about what it means to be blind are again upset when he finds that Robert is a ham radio operator who has had conversations "with fellow operators in Guam, in the Philippines, in Alaska, and even in Tahiti"(C 218). In short, his discovery

that Robert does not look or act differently than other human beings coincides with his discovery that Robert is very capable of communicating.

However, although the narrator learns that Robert is indeed capable of communication, he doesn't join the conversation between Robert and his wife. Instead, he turns the television on, a willful avoidance of having to communicate with anyone, particularly a blind man.

The transition in the story and in the narrator's experience begins when the narrator makes an effort to communicate with Robert, with whom he is eventually left alone. At first he tells us: "I waited as long as I could. Then I felt I had to say something," and he begins to describe the cathedrals that are being shown on the TV. However, the real change in the movement of the story and in the character of the narrator takes place a moment later when he shows a concern for whether or not Robert understands him, whether or not he is communicating anything to him.

> Then something occurred to me, and I said, "Something has occurred to me. Do you have any idea what a cathedral is? What they look like, that is? Do you follow me? If somebody says cathedral to you, do you have any notion of what they're talking about? Do you know the difference between that and a Baptist church, say?" (C 223-24)

When Robert tells the narrator that he does not have a good idea of what a cathedral is, the narrator tries to describe one.

> I stared hard at the shot of the cathedral on the TV. How could I even begin to describe it? But say my life depended on it. Say my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else.
>
> I stared some more at the cathedral before the picture flipped off into the countryside. There was no use. I turned to the blind man and said, "To begin with, they're very

> tall." I was looking around the room for clues. "They reach way up. Up and up. Toward the sky. They're so big some of them, they have to have these supports. To help hold them up so to speak. (C 224)

Clearly the narrator struggles with words, repeats himself, and is unable to articulate what he sees (even if his "life depends on it") despite his real effort to do so. Finally he tells us: "'You'll have to forgive me,' I said. 'But I can't tell you what a cathedral looks like. It just isn't in me to do it. I can't do anything more than I've done'"(C 227). As is the case with so many Carver characters, his attempts to make himself understood verbally fail.

However, at this point the real communication begins. Robert asks the narrator to draw a cathedral with him, their hands joined-- to try to describe with actions what he can't describe with words. They begin to draw, and Robert coaxes the narrator on, becoming a voice of reason and inspiration to the narrator. "'That's right. That's good,' he said. 'Sure. You got it, bub. I can tell. You didn't think you could. But you can, can't you'"(C 227). Robert then tells the narrator to draw with his eyes closed which he does, and which works further to connect the experience of the two characters. By the story's end, it is clear that they have found a way to successfully communicate without words, and that this communication transcends normal experience. It becomes not only a moment where the nonverbal achieves what the verbal cannot, but also a moment of hope and inspiration for the previously pessimistic narrator who says:

> So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now.
> Then he said, "I think that's it. I think you got it," he

said. "Take a look. What do you think?"
But I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do.
"Well?" he said. "Are you looking?"
My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything.
"It's really something," I said. (C 228)

The end result of this successful communication is a unity between Robert and the narrator, but it is also a learning by or enlightenment of the narrator-- an achievement of understanding that eludes those characters in Carver's other stories whose communication attempts fail. Here, it is also significant that the initial pessimism of the story (and specifically of the narrator) diminishes as communication increases. The narrator's learning the truth about Robert's appearance and ability to communicate, and his effort to communicate with Robert result in both his revitalization and in an unquestionably cathartic ending. This implies both that communication is the answer to many of the problems experienced by Carver's characters, and that if a real effort at communication is made, it can be rewarding. Likewise, a failure to communicate (whether or not an effort is made), as in "One More Thing" and "A Serious Talk" results in a negative and unresolved conclusion. Although Carver does not suggest a judgement of his characters based on their communicative abilities or successes, his stories reveal that communication is either directly responsible, or closely connected to both the level of understanding that the characters achieve and the tone and mood of the story.

In addition, although communication <u>is</u> achieved in "Cathedral," the text also implies that the "sighted" in Carver's

stories are too often unable to see, to perceive and understand their lives. Here, it takes a blind man to teach them how to see, to learn and to communicate. Further, the communication comes as "expression that stops short of the effort and commonality of speech"(8), managing to skirt the verbal problem without solving it. Finally, as evident in "Cathedral," the "verbal supply of the characters seldom matches the demands of true intimacy"(9). Therefore when communication and intimacy are achieved in Carver's stories, they often occur nonverbally. (For further examples see the stories "Intimacy" and "Will You Please be Quiet, Please?" (the title of which itself suggests the failure of verbal communication)).

THE NARRATOR

As apparent in "Cathedral," the narrator shares the verbal and interpretive problems of the characters. Kim Herzinger, describing the narrator in stories like Carver's refers to "an equality of narrator and character, a narrator who often speaks with the same voice as the characters described, and who generally refuses to evaluate characters by ascribing historical, psychological, socio-economic, or moral motivations for their behavior"(10). In fact, in most Carver stories ("Cathedral" is an example), because the narration is in the first person, the narrator is also a character within the story who shares the other characters' verbal ineptitude and inability to explicate, offering us little if any information that transcends simple, dramatic description.

The convention of the first person narrator and the fact

that he or she tells the reader a story about him or herself suggests that the narrator wants to communicate the significance of an experience to the reader. While Carver's narrators make this desire clear, is make the reader aware of the existence of a significance, they don't convey what this significance is. Even in stories told in the third person, the narrator's language-- his or her interpretive and descriptive abilities-- and point of view remain very similar to those of the characters. The narrator remains closely aligned to only one character and one character's point of view. Charles Newman notes that "the narrator is dragged down by his characters, adopting their limitations and defects..."(11). In other words, in the same manner in which the characters fail to communicate with each other, the narrator fails to effectively and clearly communicate to the reader.

For instance, a third person narrator in "Why Don't You Dance" states: "In the lamplight there was something about their faces. It was nice or it was nasty. There was no telling"(WHAT 8). This ambiguous description, and the inability to express clearly with words experienced by Carver's characters and narrators in general necessarily brings the reader into consideration since the language or words used by the narrators are also the medium through which the reader is led to or kept from understanding, or through which the text communicates with the reader.

As Rust Hills claims, "every story has an author and a reader, and how the story gets from one to the other is at the heart of the matter"(12). The manner in which the story gets from the author to the author is the style in which the author writes, and point of view may be the aspect of style that affects our

reading most. Given the limited comprehension and verbal abilities of Carver's narrators, are we as readers able to come to an understanding of the story that transcends that of the characters-- to interpret or understand what they cannot? As stated earlier, I believe that Carver's use of style, and particularly of narrators who have difficulties articulating, creates an interpretive, readerly experience that is similar to the experiences of the characters. Carver's narrator is a stylistic device that controls the reader's interpretive access to the stories. Whether the narration is in the first or third person, because of verbal limitations, the narrator often impedes rather than facilitates an understanding that the reader presumably would have had given the opportunity of unmediated or first-hand experience.

Carver makes the reader's experience of the story mimic the experience of the characters in the story. If the characters are confused, he confuses the reader. The effect of this is that the characters' communication problems become the reader's. Further, Carver prevents his readers from critically dismissing his characters by forcing his responses and reactions to be similar to those of the characters.

This is the case in the story "Why, Honey?" The narrator claims that her son, now a prominent politician, led a life of deceit and mischief as a youth and lied to her whenever she tried to find out what he was doing. However, as the title intimates, and as illustrated throughout the story, she is confused. Her arguments are fuzzily unconvincing and inconclusive, and her

enigmatic point of view is the only point of view we encounter. The effect of all this is to leave the reader, like her, confused.

From the beginning, she states that her son could "not tell the truth," but she also tells us: "I can't give you any reasons"(WHERE 121). She then proceeds to list several events to show that he misled her. Sometimes the reader is not sure that her son has lied at all, and other times, when it seems he has lied, the reader is not convinced that he did so to intentionally hide anything as significant as the unexpressed yet, for her, clearly terrifying actions that she intimates his lies were concealing.

At one point, the narrator questions her son after he has been out all night. He says he has been hunting.

> Where did you go?
> Up to the Wenas. We got a few shots.
> Who did you go with, honey?
> Fred.
> Fred?
> He stared and I didn't say anything else. (WHERE 123)

Here, there seems to be something about "Fred" that she doesn't tell us. Is he merely unknown to her? Or is he the local murderer? Later, she goes to his car and finds a shirt "full of blood" lying near his gun and knife. He tells her he had a bloody nose. But does the fact that she tells us of finding the shirt, knife, and gun together mean that he has killed someone, or even that <u>she</u> thinks he has?

The climactic scene, after which he leaves home for good and she runs to her room, is also the climax of the reader's confusion since the event described is so puzzlingly told, that

we cannot really say what has happened. The narrator says to her son:

> ... suppose you had a child... Why should he lie, you ask yourself, what does he gain I don't understand. I keep asking myself but I don't have the answer. Why, Honey?
>
> He didn't say anything, he kept staring, then he moved over alongside me and said I'll show you. Kneel is what I say, kneel down is what I say, he said, that's the first reason why.
>
> I ran to my room and locked the door. He left that night... (WHERE 126)

This is all he says. What he "shows" her, what his telling her to kneel down means, what the "first reason" is, are mysteries. All we know is that whatever he does is enough to make her run to her room, and eventually change her address and her name. Is he truly malevolent, or was his behavior at their last meeting occasioned by his anger about her meddling and her paranoia in general? Carver involves us in this process of questioning through using this confused narrator, who ends the story by asking the person to whom she is writing this letter (the story is written as her letter to someone seeking information about her son), how he found her. The tale is full of her unanswered questions and ends with an unanswered question. The reader is also left with unanswered questions because of the narration, and left with an experience of confusion that is similar to that of the narrator herself. Again, by leaving these questions asked by the narrator unanswered, Carver joins the experience of the reader with the character/narrator.

In the story "Fat," Carver also maintains a similarity between the characters' and reader's experiences. The narrator tells her friend, Rita, a story about the fat man she waited on. The reader shares Rita's experience of the story since both Rita

and the reader are in the position of audience. This is clear the moment the story begins: "I am sitting over coffee and cigarettes at my friend Rita's and I am telling her about it"(WHERE 64). Both Rita and the reader wait to find out what this "it," this significance, is. At one point the narrator says: "I know I was after something. But I don't know what"(WHERE 67), still unable to explain to Rita (or the reader) what that "something" is. When the narrator finishes telling about how she served the fat man, the apparent significance of the event remains unexplained, and Rita's questions are also the reader's.

> What else? Rita says, lighting one of my cigarettes and pulling her chair closer to the table. This story's getting interesting now, Rita says.
> That's it. Nothing else. He eats his desserts, and then he leaves and then we go home, Rudy and me. (WHERE 68)

Again, Rita's final reaction to the story, and her relationship to the narrator mirror the reader's.

> That's a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she doesn't know what to make of it.
> I feel depressed. But I won't go into it with her. I've already told her too much.
> She sits there waiting, her dainty fingers poking her hair.
> Waiting for what? I'd like to know. (WHERE 69)

Although the point of view from which we receive the story is essentially different from how Rita receives it (since the narrator not only tells us the story she told Rita but also describes to us her interaction with Rita) and suggests different levels of communication between the narrator and character and narrator and reader, the two stories (narrator to character and narrator to reader) bear no significant differences. While first person narration in general suggests the narrator's desire to

convey something to the reader, in this instance, we become aware of an intended message, but not of anything specific. Like Rita, because of the narrator's reticence, we "don't know what to make" of the story. Like Rita, we are left waiting for the narrator not just to let us know that something significant has happened, but what that significance is. But the narrator "won't go into it." Here, as in "Why, Honey?," Carver creates a similarity between the reader's and characters' experience of the story through a narrator who lacks the ability or willingness to explain.

STYLE

While the narrator is Carver's chief means of communication with the reader (and also a significant part of the author's style), many other aspects of style contribute to the communication situation between author and reader. As Rust Hills notes, "point of view also controls a good deal of the style and language used, the nature of perception in passages of description..."(13). Thus, when we view the narrator not as an entity independent of the author but as a stylistic device that the author uses to control our access to the narrative, we can begin to consider the other aspects of the author's textual construction that affect our reading.

Carver himself alludes to the manner in which his stories communicate to the reader in "On Writing."

> What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things. (14)

This concept of having to identify what it is that is "just under

the smooth surface," or of reader participation in the production of meaning-- the communication between text and reader-- is what interests me most about Carver's work. While omission is practiced widely in short story writing in general (the form itself is one of suggestiveness and omission), what is left out of Carver's writing is often unknown and truly ambiguous-- (what is really the truth in "Why, Honey?" and what is the narrator in "Fat" both trying to tell us and concealing from us?).

For Carver, the nature of the omitted is often a question that remains unanswered or a problem unsolved. In comparing Carver's style to Hemingway's, Dean Flower has noted that "where Hemingway's purified style was meant to imply volumes of unspoken knowledge, like the seven-eighths of an iceberg underwater, Carver's method suggests that the other seven-eighths either isn't there or isn't knowable"(15). I believe that this "other seven-eighths" exists but that it cannot be specifically identified. It is clear that Carver's characters feel and react to very real and intense feelings and forces. Carver doesn't specifically define them for the reader (define the shapes of the icebergs) because his characters cannot define them.

Although Carver's writing is spare and simple, it is not empty but extremely suggestive. The absence of narrative interpretation and the spareness of the writing in general tend to make the simple words that are used resonate with potential meaning. As Carver describes it, "[i]t's possible in a poem or short story to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language and to endow those things-- a

chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring-- with immense, even startling power"(F 24). In this way, Carver's spareness of style fills what is written about with more possible meanings.

Because of this suggestiveness, while we often can't "know" precisely what is left out, Carver often seems not only to be hiding a knowledge or a meaning, but also a specific meaning, something that the reader feels he or she should know but which, given the reticent nature of the texts, cannot be clearly defined. (This is the effect produced in "Fat" when the narrator says she has already told Rita too much, but where "too much" doesn't seem to be enough to clearly define the significance or "power" of the story to which the narrator reacts for either Rita or the reader.) This aspect of Carver's style has frustrated reviewers and critics. Our readerly expectations of being able to identify what a story means-- to identify what forces, extratextual incidents or causes can be used to explain or interpret the story and the character's reactions-- are often disappointed. While some have seen this as Carver's failure to successfully communicate his story to the reader and therefore a weakness in his writing (Charles Atlas in "Less is Less"), I believe that this effect is not a failure but an intention.

Carver himself, talking about poems and stories, suggests this intention when he speaks of "what the writing is aiming for, in the compression of language and emotion, and in the care and control required to achieve their effects"(16). Carver withholds information not because he's incapable of saying what he wants to, but because his characters are, and because he wants his

readers' experience to approximate that of his characters. While the reader obviously knows more than any character and has more ways of critically approaching the subject matter, there is still a similarity between the experience written about and the experience Carver provokes through his writing. He prevents the reader from commanding a god-like, objective view of his characters' world, and through his style the characters' frustration and bewilderment becomes ours.

We can look at the effects of the text on our reading not just in terms of the narration but also in terms of the smaller units of style that also play a role in placing us on a level of experience similar to that of the characters. The colloquial style used by Carver consists of repetitions and redundancies, cliches, pronouns lacking antecedents, and many other attributes that affect the reading process. Cumulatively, they result in the characters' and reader's inability to interpret conclusively-- to pin-point the "power" or force which Carver speaks of and which the characters feel. These stylistic attributes deserve some individual attention.

The characters in Carver's stories grope for words, often repeating themselves and creating meaningless redundancies. In "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" even the title "mimes the repetitiveness of speech"(17). In Carver's writing, these repetitions usually point to something felt or known by the characters that can't be clearly expressed to the reader. Certainly this is the case in "One more thing." L.D. says almost nothing but "I'm going. I'm leaving this nuthouse," and the

repetition of these words suggests his desire to say something more than what he has already said, or express a feeling which he hasn't been able to express, but which lies behind the spoken words and which, because of L.D.'s inability, the reader cannot define either. The repetions thus work toward equating the experience of the reader with the experience of the character.

Further affecting the reader's response is Carver's use of ellipsis. His characters talk around what they're trying to say and sometimes end sentences midway with "etc." and "...." The effect of this, and the effect of such ellipsis on our reading in general suggests not that we cannot know what is left out but that we can't define it specifically. Again, this puts us on the level of the characters who also can't define "it" and "thing," who point to forces and feelings yet cannot specify them.

Also characteristic of Carver's writing is the use of cliches which are a part of the colloquial style in general. The lack of originality of expression that is the nature of cliches draws attention away from the importance or urgency of what's being said, making the communication to the reader less singular, original, and powerful. While such cliches appear throughout Carver's work, the story "Intimacy" is especially full of them.

> Your private hobby horse, she says. What's done is done and water under the bridge, she says... Don't you ever get tired of dredging up that old business? She says, Let go of the past, for Christ's sake. Those old hurts. You must have some other arrows in your quiver, she says... I think you're crazy as a bedbug. (WHERE 445)

Any urgency in this woman's speech to her ex-husband is belittled since the many cliches draw the reader's attention toward themselves and away from the message they are conveying to both

ex-husband and reader. As stated earlier, I am contending that this style and these effects are not weaknesses in Carver's writing but intentional stylistic devices.

The use of cliche is part of a cumulative distancing effect on the reader, a distancing which prevents the reader from conclusive readings of the text just as it prevents the characters from conclusive readings of their lives. In passages like the one above, through encountering the flurry of cliches, we are pulled back from the text and instead of concentrating on the message of her words, we question whether or not a character who relies on the hackneyed and therefore questionably precise language of cliche is saying what she really means?

This distancing is particularly strong in the stories in which Carver does not use quotation marks to separate description from dialogue, and in which he uses pronouns without antecedents. The story "Why Don't You Dance" ends: "There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying"(WHAT 10). The reader is left without knowing what "it" is beyond a certain point, even when this "it," this nameless feeling or force, is the subject of the story. Similarly, in "Fat," the nature of the "it" about which the narrator is trying to tell Rita remains unclear as does the "something" the narrator is "after." Again, I think Carver does this to make our experience similar to the characters', who also can't define "it" even when the ability to define is highly important to them as it is in "Why Don't You Dance?."

Again, in the previously discussed story "One more thing," the reader is left without knowing what the "thing" that L.D.

wants to say is. As noted by Thomas LeClair, "Carver may know 'it' and 'thing,' but he doesn't say either"(18). The reader is left without a clear sense of what "it" is in the same way that L.D., who "doesn't know what to say" is.

Carver's lack of characterization and particularly the fact that he often does not give his characters names has a similar effect. In "Why, Honey?" neither the narrator nor her son (the subject of her story) are named. Throughout "Ducks," the characters are described with the pronouns "he" and "she," and in "Why Don't You Dance?," they are "the boy" and "the girl." This lack of names diminishes the reader's ability to get into the text through identification with the characters. It distances the reader from the story and places the story on a mysterious and archetypal level-- it makes the story both suggestive and unspecified.

A similar distancing effect occurs in the many stories which have no quotation marks separating the descriptive narration from the dialogue. A passage from "Why, Honey," illustrates.

> He didn't say anything, he kept staring, then he moved over alongside me and said I'll show you. Kneel is what I say, kneel down is what I say, he said, that's the first reason why. (WHERE 126)

Here, the lack of quotes adds to the confusion of the already confusing moment since the reader is left to distinguish the descriptive from the spoken and one speaker from another. For instance, it is at first unclear whether the "I" of this passage is the narrator or her son. Here again, even through the indirect method of manipulating the visible text, Carver creates a readerly experience that approximates the character's. His method

and effect (here, confusing) mirror his subject (the narrator's confusion).

While reading in general, we develop expectations that are prompted by the text. In Carver's stories, we expect that the confusions and ambiguities with which so many of his stories begin will be resolved by the conclusion. Many of the story titles suggest this reading process. They pose questions like "What's in Alaska?" which we expect will be answered in the text. They are also statements of a purported occurrence or resolution. In "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," we expect a resolved statement of what we do talk about when we talk about love. In "One More Thing," we wait to hear what this "one more thing" is, and in "A Serious Talk," we expect to come across a serious talk. The stories and the characters in these stories address these problems and questions and attempt to answer and define them and therefore involve the reader (who waits to see whether or not they will be solved and answered) in this process. Significantly, the questions posed by Carver's stories are ultimately not answered and the problems not solved. When we look at the stories' endings, the place where the text leaves us when it stops, it is almost always a place near to resolution and revelation yet unquestionably shy of it.

Short story theorists such as Douglas Hesse have pointed to "end-directedness" as one of the genre's "distinguishing features"(19). This implies that as soon as we begin reading a short story, we develop expectations about how it will end-- how it will be resolved. Almost all of Carver's stories ("Cathedral"

is an exception), are open-ended. Instead of providing the closure or resolution we wait for, the places where the text stops are often middles masquerading as endings. Although they usually emphasize the fact that something significant is happening, whatever it is remains ambiguous and beyond articulation. Again, by leaving the end "open," Carver emphasizes the fact that in the world he describes things seldom are understood and ambiguities seldom resolved. He uses form-- here the lack of conclusion and resolution, or of closed ending-- to reflect this and keep the reader from resolving a situation that his characters cannot.

As pointed out earlier, the story "Why, Honey?" ends with questions, failing to answer the question or solve the problems it originally poses. "Fat" ends:

> It is August.
> My life is going to change. I feel it. (WHERE 69)

Although the significance of the narrator's meeting the fat man seems to be connected to her statement here, it is not clear how it is connected, or how her life will change. This ending also presents an example of how Carver's style endows language with unspecified suggestiveness. The fact that "It is August" seems extraordinarily significant here. Yet significant of what? There seems to be something contained in "August" which Carver, through the narrator, withholds from the reader. Carver uses the narrator's last words to suggest the imminence of an important change or revelation yet one that, because it lies beyond articulation for the character, also does for the reader.

"Where Is Everyone?" ends:

> But I woke up with a start, the pajamas damp with sweat. A snowy light filled the room. There was a roaring coming at me. The room clamored. I lay there. I didn't move.
> (F 183)

This ending not only points away from resolution, but also appears without textual preparation. But again, although the "roaring," the "clamoring" and the ending in general have no apparent connection to the rest of the story, they suggest the imminence of some huge and important event, the cause and significance of which the reader cannot clearly define.

Basically, Carver's endings suggest that something momentous has occurred or will occur, yet, like his characters, we often don't know what it is or why it is momentous. Writing of the story "Preservation," Michael Gorra asks: "what makes Carver's choice of an ending anything more than arbitrary?... For this ending to work one needs the social detail, the context, that Carver's deliberately undersuggestive prose won't provide..."(20). While the inconclusive effect pointed to here is real, for me the key word is "deliberately." Carver's omission of "context" and his abrupt endings are, I believe, intentional. It's this "control" of effects of which Carver writes that keeps the reader on an experiential level similar to that of the characters-- that makes the world of Carver's characters more convincing and real to the reader and the reader's experience of that world.

Carver causes reader expectation or interpretive deferral with his use of chronology in particular. The Carver story as a whole often moves backward, starting without an introduction of preceding events and forcing the reader to wait for their

provision. In "So Much Water So Close To Home," for instance, the story starts by showing the effects of an event first described much later in the story, forcing the reader to wait for and search for an explanation of those effects. When we find out that the characters' behavior at the story's beginning is a reaction to the discovery of a woman's body in a river, although it provides a basis for the opening tensions and confusions, it still does not solve these confusions, nor are they satisfactorily explained by the story's end. We wait for a resolution or wholeness to emerge from the fragments, but often this doesn't happen. Here again, the communication situation between text and reader (the reader's ability to understand) reflects the level of understanding achieved by the characters. Because the characters do not resolve the tensions and complexities of the story, Carver moves our experience toward theirs even through his use of form.

Whether or not the stories are structured linearly through time, they often consist of fragments, paragraphs physically separated on the page. As in "Why Don't You Dance," these spaces indicate not only temporal leaps, or time left out, but also what seems to be missing narration. The reader is left to fill in the spaces and connect the pieces. Carver, reflecting on this spareness of his style, states that some of his stories are cut "down to the marrow, not just the bone"(21). With the skeleton comes the suggestion of the body, yet usually we can't limit the different possibilities of the text or definitively answer the questions and solve the problems it poses, nor I think are we meant to. Instead, we are meant to face the same ambiguities and

uncertainties that the characters of Carver's world are faced with.

Often the stories are fragments in themselves, with no introduction and no closed ending. The resulting reading experience is "like a motor passage through a small village, [the effect of which is that] you are out of the story before you have had a chance to decide what could possibly happen"(22). This apparent incompleteness and lack of resolution prompts Charles Atlas to say that the reader virtually cannot read these stories at all: "There is nothing here to appease a reader's basic literary needs-- no revelations, no epiphanies..."(Atlas 97). Again, while there often are "no revelations, no epiphanies" in Carver's stories, the omission of these things is intentional and works with Carver's subject of failed communication to create a similar sense of failed communication, through the text, in the reading process. But the fact that Atlas <u>expects</u> these epiphanies and revelations is also important. I think Carver, through his titles, his use of form, and his style in general creates the expectation that the text will operate in a traditional and resolutive manner as Atlas expects it to, yet the fact the it ultimately does not is part of Carver's intention.

Thus the experience of reading Carver and the reader's attempts to produce meaning resemble the way Wolfgang Iser claims we read.

> ... we obviously anticipate a meaning that will remove the illogicalities, conflicts and indeed, the whole contingency of the world in the literary work. To experience meaning as a defense, or as having a defensive structure, is, of course, also a meaning, which, however, the reader can only become conscious of when the traditional concept of meaning

> is invoked as a background, in order for it to be discredited. (24)

Carver usually leaves the "illogicalities" and "conflicts" unresolved yet he does so by writing in such a manner that we expect they will be resolved. The stories offer "patterns, parables, which seem charged with suggestion," yet which often "elude the powers of interpretation of those who recognize meaning in them"(25). This does not mean that Carver's stories are meaningless, but instead that they leave the reader unable to interpret the story conclusively which is something far different. This effect also serves the further purpose of keeping the reader from being able to too easily resolve the problems of Carver's world in which the problems transcend simple explanations and which the author takes seriously. As pointed out earlier, through these stylistic effects, Carver creates a readerly experience that mirrors that of his characters. He uses the text to evoke traditional notions of reading and finding meaning and turns them against themselves to show that, with his texts, the process doesn't achieve its ultimate goal. He intentionally creates expectations which are upset.

Because Carver so carefully controls the reading process, if we attempt to provide or fill in the withheld information or limit the text to a specific, underlying meaning, a subjectivity of interpretation seems inevitable. While subjectivity plays a part in the interpretation of any text, its role in interpreting Carver's work is larger than with more explicit texts. As Susan Lohafer points out, in writing like this, "the intensities will be less precisely controlled, less verbally triggered, and more

dependent on the reader's own sensibility and experience of life than those triggered by the abundantly said"(26). This implies that if we try to resolve the ambiguities and uncertainties of the text too definitively we may end up talking more about ourselves than about the text.

However, if we concentrate on what's given, or on the problematic and puzzling nature of what the text itself offers, we usually cannot come to definitive conclusions but instead must accept the different possibilities of the text. As Marc Chenetier notes, many of Carver's stories lead the reader into "assessment of exasperatingly unconfirmable probabilities"(27). Yet if this causes the reader to fail at conclusively understanding or interpreting a story, it is an experience of inconclusiveness which he shares with the characters and which Carver has carefully created and controlled.

In this paper I have tried to use the concept of communication to describe a central theme in Carver's work. I have also used it to describe the style in which he writes his stories and the effect of this style on the reader's response. I have ultimately attempted to show that there is an interrelatedness of theme, style and response in Carver's stories. Carver conveys the communication problems of his characters through a style that makes the reader take part in these communication problems even in the act of interpretation. He attempts to involve the reader in an experience that is similar to what his characters experience. Ultimately, he steers the reader toward participation in the story. He asks the reader

to empathize with and accept the characters and the world he describes. If the reader does not feel too manipulated by Carver's controlling style, this step results in a singular and successful communication between the story and the reader.

NOTES

1: Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, "An Interview With Raymond Carver" in Mississippi Review, 40-41, 1985, p. 75.
2: Raymond Carver, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, p. 25; Further references will be parenthetical (WHAT).
3: Vivian Gornick, "Tenderhearted Men: Lonesome, Sad and Blue," New York Times Book Review, 16 Sept., 1990, p. 33.
4: Irving Howe, "Stories of Our Loneliness," New York Times Book Review, 11 Sept., 1983, p. 43.
5: Raymond Carver, "What's in Alaska" in Where I'm Calling From, p. 77; Further references will be parenthetical (WHERE).
6: Raymond Carver, "The Ducks" in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, p. 176.
7: Raymond Carver, "Cathedral" in Cathedral, p. 209; Further references will be parenthetical (C).
8: Michael Vander Weele, "Raymond Carver and the Language of Desire" in Denver Quarterly, 22, 1987, p. 120.
9: Arthur M. Saltzman, Understanding Raymond Carver, p. 101.
10: Kim A. Herzinger, "Introduction: On the New Fiction" in Mississippi Review, 40-41, 1985, p. 16.
11: Charles Newman, "What's Left Out of Literature" in New York Times Book Review, 12 July, 1987, p. 25.
12: Rust Hills, Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular, p. 121.
13: Ibid., p. 126.
14: Raymond Carver, Fires, p. 26; Further references will be parenthetical (F).
15: Dean Flower, "Fiction Chronicle" in Hudson Review, 29, 1976-77, p.281.
16: McCaffery and Gregory, p. 70.
17: James Atlas, "Less is Less" in Atlantic, June 1981, p. 97.
18: Thomas LeClair, "Fiction Chronicle-- June 1981" in Contemporary Literature, 23, 1981, p. 87.
19: Douglas Hesse " " in Short Story Theories, Ed. Charles E. May, p. 91.
20: Michael Gorra, "Laughter and Bloodshed" in Hudson Review, 37, 1984, p. 156.
21: Mona Simpson, "The Art of Fiction LXXVI" in Paris Review, 25, 1983, p. 210.
22: Doris Grumbach, "The Extra Skin that Language Can Give" in Georgia Review, 36, 1982, p. 669.
23: Atlas, p. 97.
24: Wolfgang Iser, read, pub, date, quoted in Critical Angles: European Views of Contemporary American Literature, Ed. Marc Chenetier, p. 240.
25: Marilynne Robinson, "Marriage and Other Astonishing Bonds" in New York Times Book Review, 15 May, 1988, p. 35.
26: Susan Lohafer, Coming to Terms With The Short Story, p. 68.
27: Marc Chenetier, "Living On/Off the 'Reserve': Performance, Interrogation, and Negativity in the Works of Raymond Carver" in Critical Angles: European Views of Contemporary American Literature, Ed. Marc Chenetier, p. 175-6.

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