

ON THE FRINGES: SUBMERGED POPULATION GROUPS IN
THE SHORT STORIES OF RAYMOND CARVER AND BREECE D'J PANCAKE

Andrew G. Jones

A Thesis Submitted to the
University of North Carolina Wilmington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

University of North Carolina Wilmington

2012

Approved By

Advisory Committee

John Clifford

Janet Ellerby

Michael Wentworth
Chair

Accepted By

Dean, Graduate School

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE	10
CHAPTER TWO	27
CHAPTER THREE	40
CONCLUSION	53
WORKS CITED	56

ABSTRACT

In his study of the short story, *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O'Connor asserts that "the short story has never had a hero" but instead features "submerged population groups," which he characterizes as "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society." Raymond Carver's and Breece D'J Pancake's short stories focus on the many struggles of a submerged population group: lower class Americans. The characters in both writers' stories are impoverished, alcoholic, violent, and struggling to survive; in other words, they do not belong in mainstream society.

The concept of submerged population groups, and themes associated with this idea (poverty, isolation, lack of opportunity, and hopelessness), along with considerations of Carver's and Pancake's styles form the basic parts of this thesis, which is best characterized as a loosely connected comparative study of these authors' works. Each chapter can stand alone, but the hope is that, when read together, these parts form an interconnected study that provides readers with a greater understanding of the themes and styles shared by Carver's and Pancake's works.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere gratitude goes to Dr. Michael Wentworth, whose input, dedication, and patience allowed me to see this project through to the end. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Janet Ellerby and Dr. John Clifford, who helped make this possible.

INTRODUCTION

I was first introduced to the work of Raymond Carver when I came across a short piece in *The New Yorker*—"Rough Crossings: The Cutting of Raymond Carver"—detailing the acrimonious end to the author's relationship with his longtime editor, Gordon Lish. I was interested to learn about Lish's heavy involvement in the development of Carver's style, as I had never given a great deal of consideration to the role an editor plays in the publication of a work of fiction. Moreover, I was drawn to Carver's life story: "Considering the dreary facts of Raymond Carver's origins, he was lucky to have survived and published at all" ("Rough Crossings"). Alongside this piece, the magazine included Carver's "Beginners," the manuscript version of the story that would go on to be heavily edited by Lish and published as "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," in the collection of the same name. Reading the story, I was struck by Carver's efficiency, his crisp dialogue, how the story's style seemed to match the intimacy of the alcohol-soaked conversation the couples are having at the kitchen table. I liked that Carver wrote fearlessly about the darker side of things. Some weeks after reading this story, I picked up *Where I'm Calling From*, which, though it features stories that Carver had not previously published, is largely a compilation of work from each period of Carver's career; I devoured these stories and moved on to his other collections. Along the way, I discovered other authors, contemporaries of Carver like Larry Brown, Tobias Wolff, and Ann Beattie, fellow minimalists who also tell the stories of members of the American middle and lower class. Though I do not remember precisely how, it was through learning about some of these writers that I first came across Breece D'J Pancake (whose peculiar name alone was enough to peek my interest) and his excellent first story "Trilobites." Just as Carver's writing had seemed to "hit all of the right notes," I found the craftsmanship on display in "Trilobites" stunning. Pancake

manages to compress his story, to leave much to his readers, while also creating beautiful images out of language that is both economical and poetic. Moreover, as with Carver, once I learned more about Pancake as an individual, I became particularly interested in his stories. Ultimately, in addition to what I found stylistically appealing about Carver's and Pancake's writing, I was drawn to the fact that Carver and Pancake both write about individuals who exist outside of the society at large.

Both Carver's and Pancake's fiction was heavily influenced by events from their own lives, and though I mostly avoid considerations of biographical influence on their stories in this thesis, I do wish to provide readers some insight into their lives. Born in 1938 in the midst of the Great Depression to an impoverished family, Carver's life got off to an inauspicious start. Into adulthood, Carver, like the marginalized and down-and-out characters in his stories, struggled through poverty, marital strife, and alcoholism, but despite this adversity, he remained dedicated to writing. From the late 1950s and into the 1970s, Carver worked, as he called them, "crap jobs," but kept diligently to his writing hoping to someday achieve literary fame, or, at the very least, a decent paycheck for his stories and poems. It would not be until the 1980s, however, that Carver would finally find critical and popular acclaim, bringing with it a level of economic stability that he had never known before. Unfortunately, despite having overcome his nearly fatal alcoholism, Carver would be dead by 1988, cut down by cancer in the most productive period of his career.

In all, well over seventy of Raymond Carver's short stories have been published, and since his death, his reputation as one of America's best and most original modern short story writers has only grown, and with it, the number of writers attempting to imitate his style. Though

his work has often been characterized as minimalist, Carver rejected this term, once remarking: “There's something about 'minimalist' that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don't like” (Simpson 210). In chapter two, I offer an extended discussion of Carver's minimalism and how it is an inappropriate label for his entire canon. But regardless of how one chooses to classify Carver's stripped down style, it is evident that it has greatly influenced a number of authors: Amy Hempel, Donald Ray Pollock, and William Gay, to name but a few. As Carver's style has become more of an influence over the last decade or so, more and more scholars have begun giving consideration to aspects of Carver's life and writings. In 2007, The International Raymond Carver Society was founded, and in the same year, its members launched *The Raymond Carver Review*, a peer reviewed, electronic journal promoting the study of all things relating to Raymond Carver. More recently, in 2009, Carol Sklenicka published an exhaustive and unauthorized biography, *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life*, that received critical acclaim, including being named one of the Ten Best Books of the Year by *The New York Times Book Review*. In the same year, Carver's *Beginners* was published. This collection is comprised of the original manuscript versions of the stories that were eventually included in Carver's second collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, albeit in drastically edited form. The publication of these stories revealed the heavy-handed influence that Lish had on Carver's writing and opened up the gates for more scholarly debate concerning Carver's work and career.

As interest in Raymond Carver's work continues to grow, with scholars and critics poring over his work for new entry points for analysis and evaluating and re-evaluating his legacy, Breece D'J Pancake remains relatively unknown outside of university English and creative writing departments. Given that Pancake passed away leaving behind only a slender volume of

twelve stories, it is unlikely that his work will ever receive the attention Carver's has, or the careful consideration it richly deserves. Pancake was born into a middle class West Virginia family in 1952. His father, like Carver's, was an alcoholic, whose untimely death left a mark on his son's psyche that is evident throughout his canon, with the ghosts of dead fathers haunting a number of his characters. Unlike Carver, though, Pancake led a comfortable life that was not plagued by poverty, occupied by menial jobs, or tangled up in a bad marriage. Pancake's life, however, was plagued by his melancholic disposition and, much like Carver, heavy drinking. Nevertheless, the young author was afforded the luxury of focusing almost solely on academic pursuits throughout his life. Pancake graduated from Marshall in 1974 with a degree in English education, then, like Carver, entered a creative writing program following his bachelor's work. At the University of Virginia, Pancake studied under John Casey and James Alan McPherson and found fast literary success when, in 1977, his story "Trilobites" was published in *The Atlantic*. The story caught the attention of many critics, was popular with *The Atlantic's* readership, and the young writer looked poised to become a literary success. However, only six more of his stories would be published before he committed suicide, just short of his twenty-seventh birthday, in 1979.

That Carver achieved literary success after years of struggle, with poverty and addiction, only to pass away just as his career was gaining momentum is a tragic, though perhaps fitting, ending to the life of someone who understood, from first-hand experience, the darkness and disappointment that plagues the lives of so many Americans. Pancake, on the other hand, developed an understanding for his broken characters and realistically portrayed their desperate stories of survival, not from lived experience, but through his exceedingly sensitive nature. He

clearly loved his home state and had a deep sympathy for its impoverished citizens, who, if Pancake's characters are any indication, are fated to live hard lives and die in the same hollow where they were born. In a way, Pancake's ending is, perhaps, more tragic than Carver's, for it was with his own hands that Pancake's short, promising life came to an abrupt end. Though, as I noted earlier, I only consider biography in passing in the chapters that follow, I cannot deny that these authors' lives drew me to their work. I appreciated the authenticity: stories of damaged people written by damaged people. That they wrote about such lost souls at all led me to see a kinship between Carver and Pancake.

In *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O'Connor makes the claim that “the short story has never had a hero,” but instead features “submerged population groups,” which he characterizes as “outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society” (18-19). “Submerged population group” is, as O'Connor admits, “a bad phrase,” but an interesting idea nonetheless. If you pause to consider the types of characters who appear most often in short fiction, it is evident that O'Connor is on to something with this concept. Take, for example, Sherwood Anderson's and Flannery O'Connor's grotesque characters, or James Joyce's middle class Dubliners. It is fair, I think, to say that each of these authors are writing about submerged population groups, and so too are Carver and Pancake. Carver Country and Pancake's decaying West Virginia exist on the outskirts of society. It is in these places that we encounter financially insolvent, and mostly male, working class types who drink too much, fight with their wives and girlfriends, and who are physically and psychologically trapped. Most of these characters have been so broken down by repeated setbacks, tragedies, and disappointments that they don't know what they want out of life

anymore, or have lost the words to verbalize their desires or the will to seek them out if they do know. Truly, Carver's and Pancake's men and women have been submerged by the unfortunate circumstances of their lives. The themes shared by Carver and Pancake concerning the dismal state of the lives led by the American working class are further emphasized by the authors' sparse and stripped down prose. To present their snapshots of the gloomy lives of their down-and-out characters, both authors embrace a pared down realism that is heavily influenced by Hemingway.

The concept of submerged population groups, and themes associated with this idea, along with considerations of Carver's and Pancake's styles form the basic parts of this thesis, which I envision as a loosely connected comparative study of these authors' works. Each chapter can, I believe, stand on its own, but my hope is that they are stronger when considered as parts of a larger discussion.

In the first chapter, I provide an examination of the themes shared by Carver's and Pancake's stories and focus, in particular, on how these themes reveal both authors' sympathies for the working class. Poverty is a key issue that I consider in this chapter, as I see this being a major factor in the lives of nearly all of Carver's and Pancake's characters. In a society where a man's worth is often equated with how much money he has, Carver's and Pancake's characters—men in bankruptcy, men without enough money to feed their families—often have difficulty maintaining a sense of self-worth. Thus, these stories are often clouded by a pervasive sense of desperation and hopelessness. The toll of being confronted so often with adversity and disappointment leads many of these characters to give up on desiring anything better for their lives. These are people whose fates appear to be sealed. They are stuck in the towns where they were born, trapped by awful relationships, frozen by uncertainty, and understand that around

every corner waits another tragedy. Thus, when these characters manage to simply make peace with their disappointing lives, it comes as a relief. For those who cannot accept things as they are or who are so unaware that they do not even realize that they are dissatisfied, various, usually unhealthy activities fill the void. For example, many of Carver's and Pancake's characters drink heavily as a means of blunting the realities of their lives. The hypnotizing flashing of television screens sedates others, helping them to forget who they are, where they are.

In this chapter, I also attempt to explain why authors like Carver and Pancake, with their stories of poverty and life at the brink of total breakdown, are important in bleak times like those the country is enduring at present. Now may seem like the wrong time to wade any further into the mire, but I believe that reading depressing stories in depressing times may provide some catharsis. Perhaps in reading these stories, we can take some solace in knowing that our lives could be worse, that they could be as bad as they are for these characters. Perhaps, too, the intimacy of a story can have a greater impact on our understanding and sympathy for the struggles of our fellow citizens than might a list of statistics on a newspaper page.

In the second chapter, I shift my main focus from matters of theme to undertake an examination of the similarities between Carver's and Pancake's writing styles. As I see it, Hemingway had an indelible influence on both authors' styles as well as their stories' content. In particular, I see Carver's and Pancake's use of simple sentences, repetition, and omission/compression as being the main techniques they inherited from Hemingway. A substantial problem with performing a truly enlightening comparative study of these authors' styles, at least as I see it, is the vast difference in the number of stories published by Carver and Pancake. As I explain, Carver's style changed noticeably over the course of his career, so

discussing his style is a bit more complicated than is explaining Pancake's, which obviously did not have the chance to evolve. However, as I think Carver's stylistic changes from collection to collection are important considerations for any discussion of his style, I attempt to explain the significant similarities between Carver's style during the different phases of his career and Pancake's style. In the final portion of this chapter, I return to the idea of submerged populations and how these writers' styles are suited to their characters and to the overall content of their stories.

As I read and re-read Carver's and Pancake's stories, I found myself focusing more and more on the ways in which these authors represent female characters and femininity. In the third and final chapter, I focus in on these representations, which upon closer examination, disappointed and disturbed me. It is an unfortunate fact that, in Carver Country and Pancake's West Virginia, where the inhabitants are all members of a submerged population group, women (practically) form a submerged population group within a submerged population group. Reading these stories from a feminist perspective revealed to me that Carver and Pancake often—though with some exceptions, as I note—make their male characters more complex than their female counterparts. And, more disturbingly, women are frequently the victims of violence, and both authors often seem to be attempting to offer some explanation for this violence. As realists writing about those on the fringe of society, and particularly about the misfit men who dwell there, I understand that violence and a reverence for masculinity come with the territory. But what I find so troublesome is that Carver and Pancake demonstrate, throughout their bodies of work, such great capacity for compassion for the struggles of working class males, and then fail to extend the full measure of their sympathies to their female characters. The misogynistic

undertones of these stories may, for some, undermine the value of Carver's and Pancake's overall message of understanding and compassion for the plight of those who've been subjugated and pushed to the dark corners of society. However, I chose to tackle issues of femininity and misogyny in these stories, and further, to conclude with this chapter, which ultimately paints Carver and Pancake in an unflattering light, because I feel that this is a part of their authenticity. Just like their characters—just like all human beings, for that matter—Carver and Pancake were complex individuals, and in reading about their lives and in reading their fiction, we can find character traits and occurrences that both attract and repulse.

CHAPTER ONE

Unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and a government in gridlock have combined to create a negative mood about America's future, a fact reflected in the deep ideological fissures developing among the nation's citizens. The country has survived similar crises in its history, though much of what we are seeing now compares perhaps most readily to some of America's darkest times—the Great Depression or the antebellum years. The 1980s in the United States were another period in the nation's history marred by uncertainty and a dark mood. Reagan's decade, like now, was a time, as critic Morris Dickstein describes it, “when Americans were lowering their expectations, learning to live with limitation, to make fewer demands on their own lives.” As such, Dickstein continues, the 1980s were a time when “the culture needed a writer who reflected the downbeat mood, the sense of frustration and failure that worked its way into the fiber of individual lives” (509). Based on these criteria, Raymond Carver was precisely the writer America needed. But Carver was not the only chronicler of the lives of impoverished blue collar Americans. Authors like Richard Ford, Larry Brown, and, the other writer on which this thesis will focus, Breece D’J Pancake, also turned their sights on the darker side of American life. If we follow Dickstein's line of thinking, that we need literature that reflects our downbeat mood, then now, no less than the 1980s, is certainly an appropriate time to turn to the works of Raymond Carver and Breece D’J Pancake.

In this chapter, I will provide a broad assessment of the ways in which Carver and Pancake present sympathetic visions of the American working class and its struggles. To do this, I will focus on the economic issues that are revealed in these stories and give consideration to the cultural conditions these issues create. It would be incorrect to label Carver or Pancake propagandists, but both can fairly be labeled social-realists. Both authors' stories can be read as

condemnations of an economic system that pushes many citizens to the fringes of society. In an interview, Carver came close to directly addressing the role that ideology plays in his stories: “I write oftentimes about working class people, and the dark side of Reagan's America. So in that respect I suppose the stories can be read as criticism, as an indictment. But that has to come from outside. I don't feel I'm consciously trying to do that” (qtd. in Gentry 201). With this statement, Carver concedes that some might read his stories as commentaries on class in America, but he defers to his readers in regard to the ideological themes they may discern in his stories. It is difficult to imagine that Carver was not, in some cases, aware that his stories promoted a particular political position. Of course, Carver's sidestepping the role that ideology plays in his stories is not surprising, as it has often been said that the best art is that which conceals more than it reveals. Pancake, too, one can assume, would not have wanted to be seen simply as a conduit for putting upper class intellectuals (those individuals who we can fairly assume would be most likely to read his and Carver's stories) in touch with the harsh lives of impoverished West Virginians. Though this is certainly part of his purpose, the poetic sensitivity with which Pancake writes about ugly situations and tangled up human interactions and the care he demonstrates for craft indicate a desire on his part to be a great storyteller.

While I consider Carver and Pancake artists more than peddlers of any particular social critique, it is evident that both authors' were sympathetic to impoverished Americans. In his essay, “Fires,” Carver admits that, while his stories are not autobiographical, “most of them bear a resemblance, however faint, to certain life occurrences or situations” (736-737). Thus, Carver's knack for understanding the poor and their often despairing lives was due in large part to the fact that he had grown up in poverty and spent much of his adult life stuck in menial, low-paying

jobs. Pancake, on the other hand, had a fairly comfortable childhood, was given the opportunity to pursue advanced degrees, and, just prior to his suicide at the age of twenty-six, appeared poised to be a well-known writer. The lives of Pancake's characters bear little resemblance to his own, but his obviously keen sense of observation allowed him to tell stories that were powerful because of their authenticity. It is interesting, then, that Carver and Pancake, men whose lives shared few commonalities, produced stories that offer strikingly similar depictions of the American working class.

In their article, "Literature and Covert Culture," Bernard Bowron, Leo Marx, and Arnold Rose encourage studying literature "for what it betrays as well as what it depicts" (380). In other words, to understand a work of literature to the fullest extent, the reader must not only examine its surface elements (plot, character, setting), but also consider how an author's personal beliefs, attitudes, perceptions are revealed (often unintentionally) through their stories. Carver's and Pancake's stories, I believe, are excellent candidates for a study of this sort. To determine what these stories depict versus what they betray, I have opted to divide their content into two categories. The first category is overt content, which constitutes the common characters and plots these stories share. In considering the overt content of these stories, I will attempt to answer several questions. What do both authors intend to (and succeed at) conveying to readers in their role simply as storytellers? What are the common characteristics that Carver and Pancake assign to their working class characters? What is the overall impression that both present of the American working class? Of course, if one considers matters of overt content, one must necessarily delve into what is happening beneath the surface of these stories: the covert content. When considered not simply as short stories but as documents that, whether intentionally or

unintentionally, contain certain themes and espouse particular ideological leanings, what does one find? What can be said of these authors' ideological orientation and what value can such an orientation offer readers? Returning to Dickstein's comment regarding the country's need for writers who understand the citizenry's dark mood, what about these writers would make their stories particularly relevant or interesting to present-day readers?

Carver's and Pancake's characters are people who are unsure of what they actually want out of life and who end up as victims of inertia and confusion. As an example of such a group, O'Connor makes note of the frustrated and trapped fictional residents of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. But the characters living in Carver Country and Pancake's West Virginia certainly fit this mold as well. To put it simply, Raymond Carver and Breece Pancake portray the life of working class Americans as hopeless. Carver's stories, told with sparse, pared back language, offer grim glances into the often miserable lives led by poor Americans. O'Connor also notes that the short story writer does not have the space to write about the "totality of human life" and "must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it" (2). Carver typically drops his readers right into the action, with little explanation of what has led up to the distressing scene being played out by his characters. Moreover, he offers only the vaguest sense of resolution. The only thing one can assume for Carver's characters is that life is unlikely to improve and, if anything, is probably only going to get worse.

Breece Pancake provides a view of the lives of blue collar West Virginians that is as bleak as Carver's. However, while Carver, with his minimalist prose, gives readers a peeping tom's view into the domestic scenes taking place in ramshackle homes all across Nowhere America,

Pancake is more expansive stylistically, and he provides a clear setting for all of his stories: the hollows of West Virginia. Regardless of setting, what forms the covert content of Pancake's stories, like Carver's, is that there is a large segment of American society who are suffering due to poverty and a lack of opportunity.

In the story "What is It?" from Carver's first collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, readers encounter Leo, a middle aged man who has recently filed for bankruptcy, and his wife Toni, who is going out to do whatever it takes to survive, including, it turns out, offering sexual favors to sell their convertible, a remnant of the time in their lives when the couple was still happy. However, the car must now be sold before the couple heads to bankruptcy court. Toni's disdain for Leo is evident from the start of the story, as when he comments that he would buy a car from her: "But you don't have money,' she says, peering into the mirror. She pats her hair, frowns. 'And your credit's lousy. You're nothing'" (157). After Toni leaves, Leo sits alone at home and, like so many of Carver's characters, drinks heavily while watching television to take his mind off of his many troubles. Toni's malicious remarks to Leo and her cavorting about reveal her unrestrained disdain for her husband, and, as readers, we see a man nearing total breakdown: "He listens to the traffic on the highway and considers whether he should go to the basement, stand on the utility sink, and hang himself with his belt. He understands he is willing to be dead" (160). Carver does not always reveal this much about his characters' feelings and thoughts, which makes this passage particularly interesting. Not only does this revelation make Leo more vulnerable and worthy of sympathy, it points to what forms the covert content of this entire story: Without money in America, one loses dignity, the respect of others, and even the will to live.

Leo waits for hours to hear from Toni, who finally calls, claiming to be at a restaurant (it is actually the car salesman's home), and mentions that she has told the salesman about Leo's being bankrupt: "He said personally he'd rather be classified a robber or a rapist than a bankrupt," and she then informs Leo that dinner and drinks (and, it is assumed, sex) with the salesman are just "part of the deal" (162). There is a double meaning in this "deal." For while Toni is obviously referring to the sale of the car, it is also evident that her mistreatment of him, including bold-faced adultery, is just something that he is going to have to accept as an additional humiliation that comes with financial ruin. Moreover, we can only imagine the sorts of indignities he will suffer when he goes to court and must stand before a judge who will issue an order to seize the few items he and Toni have left. And what comes after that? Leo will be branded a "bankrupt" for the rest of his life: to would-be employers, creditors, neighbors, friends, and family. And in America, where hard work and self-sufficiency are among the noblest of virtues, going bankrupt is seen as a personal failing of the worst sort, indicating that an individual does not have control of his life and cannot make good on his promises to others.

When Toni finally returns home at dawn, both she and Leo are intoxicated, there is a scuffle between them, and Leo, in a murderous rage, looks for "something heavy" with which to strike his wife. Fortunately, Leo does not lay his hands on any blunt objects. The car salesman returns several minutes later to leave Toni's makeup pouch on the porch, and Leo confronts him in the driveway, as the salesman sits in the convertible. As with Toni, Leo is unable to use physical violence against the salesman and does not even raise his voice, but simply allows him to drive off. When Leo finally climbs into bed beside Toni, he traces the stretch marks on her thighs and remembers "waking up the morning after they bought the car, seeing it, there in the

drive, in the sun gleaming” (164). One imagines that Leo probably recalls with a similar fondness the first time he saw Toni. But now all of the money and the car is gone and with them his marriage. “What is It?” is the epitome of a Carver story, with average people suffering through financial failure, alcoholism, and an imploding marriage somewhere in America. Like so many of his stories, “What is It?” demonstrates Carver's understanding of the wrecking ball effect that being broke in America has on one's life.

Pancake's stories, like Carver's, reveal a similar sympathy for impoverished Americans. In fact, critic Albert Wilhelm contends that Pancake's “depictions of poverty are surely among the most moving to be found anywhere in American literature” (44), while James Alan McPherson notes that Pancake was “very self-conscious about the poverty of his state” (11). Pancake makes every effort to present his West Virginians as flawed but decent people who have been born into situations from which they cannot escape. Carver, on the other hand, frequently shows his characters as people who had chances at (or actually had) better lives but made mistakes. For Pancake, poverty seems almost to be a given for West Virginians. The main character of “First Day of Winter,” Hollis, has been abandoned to care for his parents by his brother Jake, who, after escaping West Virginia, has apparently chosen to never look back. Hollis, who it is assumed is middle aged, lives with his parents on a farm, in a falling-down house, which the narrator describes as “the tomb Jake had built for him” (163). Hollis's mother is sinking into senility and she refuses to bathe, so the ramshackle home is suffused with her odor, while his father is both blind and emotionally distant, two conditions that render him unable to see or sense Hollis's frustration and pain. Hollis is a farmer and this work does not afford him or his parents anything beyond a subsistence existence. Moreover, like so many Americans, his

work does not belong to him but is done for “figures in a bank, for debts” (163). But Hollis is not simply alienated from his labor; he is alienated from his own brother, his parents, and from the world outside of his family's run-down farm.

Hollis and his parents are too poor to afford to fix their car, and the inoperable vehicle represents yet another way, along with having to single-handedly care for his aging parents and their failing farm, in which Hollis is trapped by poverty. It is interesting that in both “What is It?” and “First Day of Winter” automobiles act as symbols of wealth or a lack thereof. For Leo and Toni, being forced to sell their convertible and return to driving their old sedan is devastating. They no longer occupy the rung of society where one not only has the disposable income to buy a car, but can afford a second, showy one. Automobiles are so ubiquitous in America that those who can easily afford to own and operate one rarely consider what life is like without one. For Hollis and his parents, unlike Leo and Toni, having a car has nothing to do with their social position but has everything to do with their physical mobility.

“First Day of Winter” takes place on Thanksgiving, but there is no turkey for Hollis and his parents. Without Jake's assistance and lacking the funds to purchase typical Thanksgiving fare, Hollis ventures into the woods to hunt for squirrels for their Thanksgiving meal. While in the woods waiting for a squirrel to bound out of the underbrush, Hollis realizes that he has not had any food all day, only a cup of coffee, and, upon this realization, he feels a “sinking in his gut, a cold hunger” (165). Like the car in the driveway, food in the cupboard is something that many Americans take for granted. Hollis and his parents are not so desperate that they are starving (though they may be in dire straits as the winter wears on without the means to reach town) but they obviously do not have surplus funds for (at least for them) luxury foods, like a

Thanksgiving turkey.

My own biases certainly affect the way in which I read the covert content of these stories, for as I see it, Pancake's characters, though flawed in myriad ways, are, in large part, people for whom I feel compassion. For example, while Hollis is out hunting for food for his family, he feels “old and tired, worn and beaten” when he thinks about the “state home [Jake] wanted the folks in” (166). These feelings indicate that, despite the fact that he is clearly overwhelmed by and exhausted from caring for his parents, Hollis is genuinely concerned for their welfare. Thus, when the narrator tells us that, while still in the woods cradling his rifle and thinking about his parents, Hollis “wondered what it would be like to smother them” (167), the reader has the sense that this disturbing vision is one bred more from frustration than malevolence. Or, if we consider the fact that things appear poised only to become worse, with Hollis's parents' health declining and no transportation into town for food or medical care, it might be that Hollis sees smothering them at home as a more merciful fate than what might await them in a state-run home. Like Leo, who clears his head of thoughts of suicide and murder, Hollis quickly dispatches thoughts of smothering his parents. But Pancake tells us that nevertheless “a darkness had covered him” (167).

“What Is It?” and “First Day of Winter” are among Carver's and Pancake's bleakest stories. Obviously, considering suicide or having homicidal urges certainly signal that a “darkness” has settled over one's life. And, of course, what has brought both Leo and Hollis to these dangerous and unsettling thoughts is largely the damaging effects of being penniless in a society where a man's worth is measured by how much money he has. When poverty levels rise, as they have in recent years and as they did in Carver's and Pancake's time, it is the citizens who

have already been marginalized who are most affected. Having even less money than the pittance one had before places greater stress on all of the other pressure points in one's life: intimate and familial relationships, the acquisition of basic necessities, physical and mental health. In “What is It?” and “First Day of Winter,” the covert content is informed by the concept that financial ruin and poverty have far-reaching effects on human beings, both psychologically and physically (for example, when one is without nourishment). In many cases, poverty is a condition into which individuals are born and often never escape—like Pancake's trapped West Virginians. From the beginning of their lives, these individuals face an uphill battle to simply survive. Thus, their model of success is not that of the dominant culture, which suggests power, prestige, and wealth are available if one just works hard enough. Ultimately, impoverished individuals find themselves subjugated to those with the money and power—and to a culture that accepts this structure of inequity as reasonable, perhaps even natural—and this leads to, as cultural critic Stanley Aronowitz succinctly states, “their inability to transcend their immediate situation and become conscious actors in the social drama” (398). In all, Carver and Pancake present poverty as a condition that leads to powerlessness and a loss of hope.

The idea that the American working class is dogged by a pervasive hopelessness, fostered by the effects of poverty, is among the major themes in Carver's and Pancake's stories. Going bankrupt and having to endure the overt infidelity of one's wife or being left to care for one's dying parents with no financial resources are situations that would devastate most individuals. What is next for people like Leo and Hollis? How can things possibly get better? Is there anything that they can do to prevent their lives from worsening? Neither Carver nor Pancake leave readers with the sense that good news is on the horizon for either character. Kirk Nessel, in

an assessment that likewise applies to Pancake's West Virginians, writes that Carver's characters are people who translate their hopelessness into “obsessive behaviour, into desperate and abusive patterns, into drinking, smoking, and eating, into adultery, into voyeurism and, on occasion, violence—behaviour linked, as Paul Skenazy observes, 'to a sense of failure and a recognition of the gap between American possibilities and their own hard lot'” (3–4). Poverty and the hopelessness that results from it have far-reaching effects on these characters, frequently leading them to search for methods by which to escape the painful realities of their lives. In most cases, such methods are both futile and utterly self-destructive.

Heavy drinking is the most common method by which Carver's and Pancake's characters seek to forget life's miseries. Carver was an erratic, and sometimes violent, alcoholic for many years of his life before managing to kick the habit in 1977, and then only after nearly dying from alcohol poisoning. According to James Alan McPherson, Pancake also “drank a good deal.” However, unlike Carver, “when [Pancake] was drunk he would be strangely silent” (13), becoming distant and morose. Pancake's miserable and untimely death is one that we can easily imagine one of his or Carver's alcoholic characters meeting. In fact, Leo in “What is It?” comes pretty close. Likewise, the unnamed, alcoholic narrator of Pancake's “A Room Forever” is all alone on New Year's Eve in a hotel room as the story begins, and his only plan for the evening is to, as he says, “whiskey myself into an early sack” (54). But given subtle indications of suicidal ideation throughout the story, the word “sack” could likely be replaced with “grave.” In both writers' stories, thoughts of suicide, it seems, are something that go hand-in-hand with alcoholism. But thoughts of suicide are certainly not the only damage that alcohol dependence inflicts on these characters. “Careful,” for example, is one of Carver's stories that exposes the

heavy toll that heavy drinking can have on intimate relationships. Lloyd has left the home he shared with his wife, Inez, and moved into a room in an old woman's home because "being alone was the thing he needed most" while he is "trying to do something about his drinking" (442). What Lloyd has done about his drinking is transition from hard liquor to drinking several bottles of champagne a day, all while unemployed and in isolation from Inez, who is obviously one of the few people, perhaps the only person, left in his life who cares about him. Alcohol, Carver and Pancake show, is a significant problem for their characters and, by extension, real-life, working-class individuals, who, in seeking a way to avoid thinking about their depressing situations, only bury themselves more deeply in sadness with drink.

In addition to alcohol there are other distractions that, at least as these writers see it, provide a way for working class Americans to pass the time. Television frequently occupies Carver's characters as they sit in their homes, trying hard not to think. In his essay, "A Subtle Spectacle: Televisual Culture in the Short Stories of Raymond Carver," Bill Mullen provides an in-depth analysis of the role that television plays in Carver's stories. He contends that television "stands as a general sign of the superficial, homogeneous nature of consumer or 'brand name' culture; yet it is also a specific symbol of the constricted lives of the American working and lower-middle class" (102). In their homes at night, Carver's working-class men and women have nothing better to do than watch television and live vicariously through the scenes of better, or at least more interesting lives being flashed across the screen. And for Lloyd in "Careful," who, the narrator tells us, sometimes "left the set on all day and night" (442), the TV acts as an ersatz drinking buddy, making him feel, presumably, somewhat less isolated. In Pancake's "Hollow," Sally watches television and does cocaine to distance herself from her frustrated life and bad

relationships with men. One of her boyfriends, Buddy, has just struck her in the face when Sally goes into her bedroom in the trailer they share and flips on the TV: “She stretched, felt afloat in an ocean of blue light rippling around her body, and relaxed. She knew she was prettier than ... the girl on the TV, and lots more fun” (46). Sally watches the television to try and bolster her battered ego, while other characters watch as a diversionary tactic or a replacement for human interaction. In either case, TV has the effect of preventing these characters from becoming, to return to Aronowitz's statement, conscious actors in the social drama. These characters are little more than observers of the world. They are powerless and often the victims of cruel circumstances.

A similar desire to the one that leads Carver's characters to want to peer into the presumably more fulfilling lives of the celebrities and fictional characters on the television is voyeurism. In “The Idea,” an unnamed narrator and her husband, Vern, are crouched in their dark kitchen watching their neighbors as they engage in an odd fetish: It seems that the neighbor's wife enjoys having her husband peep on her from outside of their home, through their bedroom window. For the narrator and Vern, watching their neighbors engage in this fetishistic behavior is a turn-on: “Vern's a little embarrassed about watching, I think,” says the narrator. “But I know he enjoys it. He's said so” (14). The narrator herself is embarrassed, though she will not admit that she enjoys it, primarily because she has no clear understanding of her own feelings or desires. She watches the man and his wife, who perform their odd ritual “one out of every two or three nights, sometimes more” (14), instead of making love with her husband. It is clear that the sexual pleasure she may once have received from Vern has been replaced by the voyeuristic pleasure she gets from watching her neighbors. The excitement the narrator receives from watching

clearly confuses her, as she seems unable to discern just what her body wants. Ultimately, she mistakes sexual arousal for appetite and decides that she is ravenously hungry: “I put bread and lunchmeat on the table and I opened a can of soup. I got out the crackers and peanut butter, cold meat loaf, pickles, olives, potato chips. I put everything on the table” (16). Of course, what she obviously cannot “put on the table,” are her actual desires, wants, needs. Here, too, Carver touches on yet another way Americans, particularly those who are poor, seek pleasure—eating. Obesity is an epidemic in lower class America, now even more than in Carver's time. With easy access to inexpensive junk food, the poor frequently seek solace through eating, which only makes them sicker and unhappier.

Drinking alcohol, watching television, voyeurism, and overeating all provide cheap pleasure for Carver's characters. However, when compulsion drives one to engage in any of these activities, the pleasure that once *resulted* from performing the activity is replaced by the pleasure (or relief) one feels by simply *performing* the activity. For those who are poor or have few opportunities, people like Carver and Pancake write about, these types of activities—drinking, watching television—provide relief for a time, but eventually impede their motivation and impair their ability to articulate their own desires, thereby ensuring their continued dissatisfaction with life.

Like the narrator in “The Idea,” Pancake's characters are similarly disconnected from themselves. Most of Carver's characters have been broken by life's tribulations, while others appear to have just been born without much intelligence or motivation (a fair assessment, at least, when considering the narrator of “The Idea”). In either case, they tend to be passive individuals, like Leo, who cannot throw a punch at or even raise his voice to the man who has

just slept with his wife. Pancake's characters, on the other hand, are just as broken down and, in some cases, just as witless as Carver's, but they tend to act out in openly anti-social and violent ways. The unnamed narrator in "A Room Forever" is a second mate on a tugboat who, on a rainy New Year's Eve, begins his evening by attempting to kick in the door of a transsexual's motel room and engages in a rough sexual encounter with an underage prostitute whom he later finds that night in the gutter with self-inflicted slashes on her wrists. The second mate has had an unpleasant life (he was orphaned as a child and does not appear to have developed any meaningful relationships with others) and it has transformed him into a cold and uncaring individual whose only pleasure is violence. Pancake's characters are frequently more self-aware than Carver's, and the second mate in "A Room Forever" is no exception. He is unabashed when he provides an assessment of the frustrating and violent lives led by many working class Americans: "All year they grit their teeth — they pump gas and wait tables and screw chippies and bait queers, and they don't like any of it, but they know they are lucky to get it" (59). The second mate's summation of the short and (un)happy life of the average blue collar American is a fair description of the lives of many of Pancake's characters, like the main character of "The Scrapper," Skeevy Kelly, a hard drinking, coal mining pugilist with a taste for wild meat. Skeevy epitomizes Pancake's blue collar roughnecks. He works at the strip mine all day, has an on again/off again relationship with a woman whom he feels "empty talking to" (101), and drinks and fights all night. In the final scene of "The Scrapper," Skeevy is being beaten mercilessly by a larger man, as his friends and neighbors stand and watch. Skeevy takes a hit to the face and feels the "bones of his jaw shatter and taste[s] blood" (114), but he still manages to continue fighting. Another brutal series of punches levels Skeevy, though, and he bites off the tip of his tongue. As

the story ends, he spits out the chewed bit of his tongue and stands to fight again. The reader has to imagine that this fight is not going to end well for Skeevy, that in fact he may be killed. “The Scrapper” is an unsettling story, as it reveals the sort of savagery that can arise out of the kind of desperate lives that Pancake's characters lead.

Looking beyond the surface levels of these stories and delving into their covert content reveals that both Carver and Pancake have empathy for America's working class, which continually suffers because of poverty and all its attendant injuries. Returning once again to Morris Dickstein's comment that depressed times call for writers who can convey these dark feelings, both of these authors then are just what these times call for. In “What is It?” readers can no doubt see, in the personage of Leo, a figure similar to many Americans now facing foreclosures, job losses, and all other varieties of financial and personal distress. Unlike the latest unemployment numbers or even a personal story of poverty one might read in the newspaper, Carver's story offers an excruciating blow-by-blow account of a day in the life of someone staring down bankruptcy and all of the damage that comes with it. Carver takes us inside Leo's home and shows us how bankruptcy is corrupting his and Toni's marriage. Readers are even offered insight into Leo's darkest thoughts. “What is It?” demonstrates to readers, in a way that is identifiable and emotionally raw, the horror and utter havoc that is visited upon one's life when one becomes financially insolvent. Hollis from “First Day of Winter” is another character type with whom modern readers are likely familiar. With the economic downturn, many adults have been forced to return home and live with their parents. No doubt, many of these individuals feel much like Hollis when it comes to having to live with and, as is often the case, take care of their

parents. The inability to exercise independence from one's parents is likely a difficult experience for most adults because our culture expects individuals to move out of their parents' homes and into the world on their own. Add to all of Hollis's other concerns the lack of transportation and being in a position where life's basic necessities may run out, and his character is the embodiment of the ruin that impoverished individuals face . On the surface level, Carver's and Pancake's stories are simply grim tales of the individual struggles of their working class American characters. They are powerful stories, of course, crafted by writers possessing rare skills. But when one considers these stories as something more than just *stories*, it is clear that both authors are declaring their sympathy for poor and working class Americans and attempting to transmit this sense of compassion to their readers.

CHAPTER TWO

In the previous chapter, I examined the thematic concepts in Raymond Carver's and Breece Pancake's stories. Such a comparative study between these writers' works reveals a plethora of similarities and a host of commonalities between their characters. In this chapter, I will turn my attention to a comparison of Carver's and Pancake's styles. My intention here is not to perform anything like formalist readings of these stories, but instead to look at how both authors' styles reveal shared literary influences, examine the stylistic similarities in Carver's and Pancake's stories, and consider how these styles can be seen as reflective of their content.

Critics often label Carver's stories minimalist, and with this they point to the obvious influence Ernest Hemingway had on both his technique as well as the content of his stories. In Carver's economical use of language, his often stunted tone, and his focus on the seemingly banal moments in his characters' lives, Hemingway certainly seems to have had an impact on Carver. Further, scholar Arthur F. Bethea believes that the content of many of Carver's stories was heavily informed by "the domestic Hemingway," who was focused less on manly exploits and more on the subtleties of "marital relationships under stress," as portrayed in Hemingway stories like "Cat in the Rain" and "Hill Like White Elephants" (90). The title of Carver's first collection, in fact, as several critics have noted, recalls a line from Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants": "Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?" (375). Though Pancake's style is not as pared back as Carver's, he was nevertheless clearly influenced by Hemingway. In the Foreword to *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, James Alan McPherson contends that Pancake's "exact, direct, unsentimental" style was one that "derived in large part from Hemingway" (9). Likewise, in the first sentence of her review of *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake* for the *New York Times*, Joyce Carol Oates declares Pancake "a young

writer of such extraordinary gifts that one is tempted to compare his debut to Hemingway's" (24). Given the cachet that comes with a comparison to an icon like Hemingway from a prestigious writer like Oates, it is hardly surprising that this quote is emblazoned on the front cover of the 2002 edition of *The Short Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*.

In *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O'Connor contends that novelists possess the obvious advantage of having more time to develop characters and plot lines than does the short story writer, who is "forever selecting the point" at which to approach his story (21). In other words, while the novelist is expected to provide a lengthy narrative that gives us the "full story," it is the short story writer's job to select "one brief episode from [a] long and involved story" and describe it in such a way as to give readers a sense of the story's and its characters' past, present, and future (24). To accomplish this, writers must be able to spark readers' imaginations, to spur them on to considerations of more than just what is on the page. Carver and Pancake were adherents to Hemingway's so-called iceberg theory, which evolved from Chekhov's contention that it was better to say not enough than too much. Hemingway believed that the best stories are those that create suspense by omitting certain details and leaving readers to fill in the blanks. In his essay, "On Writing," Carver acknowledges that he often intends for the most powerful parts of his stories to be "the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things" (732). Both Carver and Pancake are expert at condensing their narratives through omission of details and simple syntax, just as Hemingway does. Such techniques leave readers to ponder what is occurring beneath the surface of these seemingly simple stories.

Carver's story "Neighbors" demonstrates his ability to create a story that meets

O'Connor's expectations for the form, while using Hemingway's stylistic techniques. In this story, readers are introduced to Bill and Arlene Miller, who are a happy couple, but who also feel that success and material wealth have passed them by. They long to be more like their neighbors, the Stones, who the Millers believe live a "fuller and brighter life" because they are "always going out for dinner, or entertaining at home, or traveling about the country" (8). When the Stones go out of town and leave the Millers to care for their apartment, Bill and Arlene both are thrown into an identity crisis. Being in the Stones' apartment allows them to live out voyeuristic fantasies and to see themselves as the wealthier and supposedly happier Stones; Bill and Arlene feel empowered by imagining themselves as their neighbors. But it is clear that the Millers have become caught up in the fantasy life they've created, as made evident when Arlene wonders aloud to Bill, "Maybe they [the Stones] won't come back," to which he responds, "Anything could happen" (13). As the story comes to its cringe-worthy conclusion, with the Millers' harsh re-entry into reality brought about by their being locked out of the Stones' apartment, Bill and Arlene are holding onto one another: "They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves" (13). Repetition is a technique that both Carver and Pancake learned from Hemingway, but repetition is also something that results from omission of all unnecessary details and when one is using idiomatic language. Here, the repetition of "they" combined with the way that the Millers are desperately clinging to one another as if a bomb is about to explode makes it clear that the couple is coming to the realization that they can only be who they are. What Carver leaves for readers to decide, ultimately, is whether they see the story's ending as representing an affirmation of Bill and Arlene's love or as the Millers resigning themselves to what they have: mundane lives, menial

jobs, and one another. However one chooses to decipher the meaning of the story's ending, it is impressive how powerful an effect Carver is able to create in five pages using omission and pared back prose; he leaves readers with much to consider beneath the surface of the story.

Pancake's "Trilobites" is, as "Neighbors" is for Carver, a story that exemplifies his skill in locating and framing a story and also for creating a "full" narrative out of sparse prose and compression of details. If one wishes to argue in support of Joyce Carol Oates's contention that Pancake's debut ranks with Hemingway's, then "Trilobites" is a good story to present as evidence. The story clearly shows Hemingway's influence, and it displays Pancake's linguistic and syntactic talents from its very opening lines:

I open the truck's door, step onto the brick side street. I look at Company Hill again, all sort of worn down and round. A long time ago it was real craggy and stood like an island in the Teays River. It took over a million years to make that smooth little hill, and I've looked all over it for trilobites. I think how it has always been there and always will be, at least for as long as it matters. The air is smoky with summertime. A bunch of starlings swim over me. I was born in this country and I have never very much wanted to leave. I remember Pop's dead eyes looking at me. They were real dry, and that took something out of me. I shut the door, head for the café. (21)

Like Carver, Pancake uses restrained prose and idiomatic language, and in eleven short sentences, he introduces the story's main motifs (motifs, in fact, that appear in most of his stories): a longing for the dead (particularly dead fathers) or something lost and the nagging sense that the past plays a powerful role in determining what happens in the future. In one

paragraph, Pancake introduces ideas concerning the past, present, and future, both for the story's setting as well as for the story's protagonist Colly. Oates sees this sort of introduction as a feature of many of Pancake's narratives: "The stories' opening paragraphs often announce in embryo what will follow, so that the narrative is thematically complete before, in a sense it begins, and one feels the inexorable bars of circumstance closing about the characters" (25). This technique provides readers with a broad understanding of Pancake's characters and their stories and contributes to the compactness of his narratives, what O'Connor and Hemingway, respectively, see as the short story's most important features. As in "Neighbors," Pancake uses repetition, in this case, by beginning more than half of the opening paragraph's sentences with the first person singular pronoun, making clear Colly's obsession with his own story, with figuring out his place in the world.

Unlike his father, Colly is no good at raising crops, so his mother is going to have to sell the farm, and Colly is going to have to try something else. Colly's love interest, Ginny, has moved on to another town and another man, leaving Colly lonely and bitter, or perhaps melancholy is a more appropriate description. Though we see Colly begin to assert his independence from his mother and destroy his relationship with Ginny, the story closes without Pancake giving us any real indication of what's next for Colly. Just as Carver leaves us with Bill and Arlene Miller at a crossroads, Pancake leaves us in suspense about where Colly goes from here. He claims that he can feel his fears diminishing and that he is ready to ride the rails as a hobo—just as his father and uncle once did—and get out of West Virginia. But we have to wonder if Colly won't end up like Company Hill: "always been there, and always will be."

Comparing “Neighbors” and “Trilobites” reveals a number of similarities in Carver's and Pancake's styles as well as the shared influence of Hemingway. However, there are some intriguing differences in these authors' techniques that are worth considering. As a starting point, the substantial difference in the number of stories published by Carver and Pancake must be noted. Before committing suicide at the age of twenty-six, Pancake had published six stories, primarily in *The Atlantic*. Following his untimely death, these six, along with six other unpublished stories, were collected in *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. This slender volume, just under two-hundred pages, is, unfortunately, the full-extent of the talented young author's literary output. Given the promise these early stories show, it certainly would have been interesting to see his continued development. Carver, on the other hand, published more than seventy stories, most of which were included in three major collections. The stories that comprise these collections are notable for their discernible, sometimes drastic, differences in technique.

In his article, “A Few Words About Minimalism,” John Barth concisely defines minimalist writing as being “terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction” (1), and he lists Carver, along with Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Tobias Wolff, as being among this style's leading practitioners. Carver rejected being labeled a minimalist on the basis that it “brings up associations with narrow vision and limited ability” (qtd. in *Conversations with Raymond Carver* 80), though it is easy to see, given how often Carver's style fits Barth's definition, why critics were quick to apply this appellation to his work. While the whole of Carver's canon is often labeled as minimalist, this description best fits his mid-career work, represented by his second collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk*

About Love. To construct a more accurate description of Carver's canon, it is best to discard the notion that his stories fit into one overarching category, and instead think of Carver's work as being divisible into three distinct though obviously related stylistic periods. Although he is not the only critic to have conceptualized periodizing Carver's work, Adam Meyer is one of the few to have written about this method at length. In his article, "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism," Meyer argues against labeling Carver as a minimalist not simply "because the label is no longer popular, but because it no longer fits" (239). Instead, Meyer proposes that readers think of Carver's career as following the shape of an hourglass, "beginning wide, then narrowing, and then widening out again" (239), because, as Meyer contends, 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). Meyer's conception of Carver's career evolution presents an intriguing way to think about the variations in the author's style and content over the course of his career.

With his first collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, Carver's career had a "wide beginning," if we are to use Meyer's hourglass metaphor, particularly if we compare it to the stunted minimalism that so defines *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, the collection that appears to have largely defined Carver's career. The stories in Carver's first collection are notable for how effectively he uses idiomatic language and short, declarative sentences, both features that have come to define his style. However, in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, in stories like "What's in Alaska?" and "What Is It?", Carver offers more than the absolute minimum of exposition, allows plot lines more room for development, and provides greater insight into the feelings and motivations of his characters than he does in his second collection,

and all of this gives readers more to consider about these characters and their situations outside of the narrow boundaries of their narratives. Though the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* are often not as wide in scope or as expansive as Carver's late-career stories, an exception is the collection's eponymous story, where Carver's protagonist, Ralph Wyman, who is faced with a significant crisis when he discovers that his wife has committed adultery. The essence of Ralph's crisis is this: Should he give up on the life he has created with Marian and simply sink back into the hard-drinking and self-destructive ways that so defined him before he met his wife? Not only is this story significantly longer than most of the stories in this collection (nearly thirty pages), but Carver provides us with a great deal of insight about Ralph—he had a damaging relationship with his father, he obviously fears women and femininity, and he has this dark, alcoholic alter-ego, which his college buddies had named Jackson, that he must keep at bay. After a night spent in the seedy part of town, where he gets drunk and is beaten and robbed, Ralph returns home, still unsure of what comes next. And while Ralph resists Marian at first, he ultimately gives in to her touch at the story's close: “He held himself, he later considered, as long as he could. And then he turned to her. He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep, and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes moving over him” (189). The repetition of “turn,” as in turning over a new leaf, in this final paragraph seems to signal that Carver intends “Will You Be Quiet, Please?” to be a story of redemption and hope, which is not a theme that he returns to until his later stories. “Trilobites,” though its ending is more ambivalent than that of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”, strikes me as being stylistically similar to Carver's story. Both Ralph and Colly are carefully developed, giving readers a sense of both characters' complexity: we know their thoughts, their insecurities, their

fears. Through these details, we can see how these characters (and their larger stories) stretch outside of the boundaries of the narratives that Carver and Pancake have created.

In Carver's second collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, his vision narrows considerably, and there are no real connections that can be drawn between his style and Pancake's during this period. It is this collection that led some critics to complain that Carver's style had become so pared back that the stories were marred by "low dramatic voltage and emptiness of depiction" (Just 308). Scholar John Aldridge, for example, contends that Carver's minimalist style in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* is a failure, asserting that Hemingway's deliberate style demonstrates a unique ability to craft a powerful story from a fraction of "all he might have said," while Carver's minimalism represents a "confession that this is all he had to say" (qtd. in Just 307). In an article revealingly titled "Less Is Less," James Atlas takes Carver's style to task for being overly simplistic and lacking in substance, commenting that Carver's stories fail to "appease a reader's basic literary needs—no revelations, no epiphanies," leaving them "with a hunger for richness, texture, excess" (97). The major shortcoming of Carver's second collection is that he simply stripped too much from these stories. "The Bath" is an example of a story that misses its mark by virtue of its paucity of characterization, development, imagery, and flat tone, a feature that seems particularly glaring in a story about a young boy run down by a car on his birthday. "The Bath" seems more like Carver's notes for a story, rather than a final version. Take the following paragraph, for example:

Of course, the birthday party never happened. The birthday boy was in the hospital instead. The mother sat by the bed. She was waiting for the boy to wake up. The father hurried over from his office. He sat next to the mother. So now the

both of them waited for the boy to wake up. They waited for hours, and then the father went home to take a bath. (252)

Simple syntax, repetition, and an unemotional tone are standard in Carver Country, and most often, Carver is able to use these techniques to great effect and, in many cases, without readers noticing. However, in this paragraph, and the rest of the story, the stunted rhythm created by stringing together grammar school simple sentences, one after the other, impedes the reading process and prevents readers from focusing on the story. With sentences so devoid of information—beyond the most basic details—it is a struggle to feel anything for these characters or their story. Carver fails to establish an appropriate tone for a story about two parents on the precipice of losing their child. Instead, the story reads like stage directions or a police report—cold, matter-of-fact. Evidently, Carver, too, was dissatisfied with “The Bath,” because, in *Cathedral*, he published a vastly expanded version of the story: “A Small, Good Thing.” Overall, Carver is more expansive, more sensitive in the revised version of his story, offering more details about the boy and his parents that make them and their story seem more human, more identifiable.

While it is too complex a topic to delve into here in any detail, Carver's longtime editor, Gordon Lish, is often given credit or blamed for Carver's minimalist style, depending on who you ask. The extent of Lish's involvement in creating Carver's style, particularly the hyper-minimalism that marks the stories included in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, has been a major source of debate among Carver scholars. In 2009, *Beginners*, Carver's original, unedited manuscript of what would become *What We Talk About*, was published, and even a cursory comparison of the two works reveals that Lish was obviously heavily involved in

shaping the final, published stories. Prior to the publication of *Cathedral*, Carver and Lish had a falling out that ended their relationships, both professional and personal, but this seems to have been a necessary step for Carver to transition into the final and most expansive portion of his career.

Returning to Meyer's concept, we can consider Carver's last two collections, *Cathedral* and *Where I'm Calling From*, as representative of the hourglass "widening out again." In these collections, Carver returns to a style that is more in keeping with the one he employed in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* In fact, to be more precise, Carver did not only return to his earlier style, he became more expansive in his later stories. This can be seen in how these stories show "an increasing willingness by Carver and his narrators to discuss, explain, and explore the emotions and situations that gave rise to the stories" (*The Short Story* 94). The stories in *Cathedral* and *Where I'm Calling From* represent a new direction for Carver, and align him even more with Pancake's more poetic technique and intimate tone. In these later stories, Carver spends time describing his characters and endows them with greater complexity than he gives the flat and broken characters in his earlier stories; he succeeds in omitting details without losing substance; and he allows himself to use a wider lens on these stories. Moreover, Carver even suggests that, for some of these characters, there may actually be a measure of hope, and his tone becomes something close to intimate in many of these stories.

In a comment that both succinctly describes and simultaneously demonstrates his style, Carver wrote that his job as a short story writer is to: "Get in, get out. Don't linger. Go on" ("On Writing" 728). However, by lingering a bit, Carver is able to present characters who are more complex and more self-aware than those in *What We Talk About*. The narrator of "Cathedral" is

an example of this new kind of Carver character. Initially the narrator is nervous to have his wife's blind and male friend stay at the house, but the narrator and his wife's friend, Robert, end up sitting in front of the television together late into the night, and a show about cathedrals is on. The blind man wants to know what a cathedral looks like. The narrator tries to describe a cathedral, but like so many Carver characters, cannot conjure up the right words. Unlike most Carver characters who simply give up trying to explain anything, the narrator instead agrees to guide the blind man's hand as they work to draw a cathedral together. The narrator and Robert make a connection as they sketch the walls, windows, spires, and people, and this ability to communicate with the blind man, who had at first made him nervous, is exciting for the narrator: "It was like nothing else in my life up to now" (528). Finding a way to explain and express himself to another human being, which was something the narrator thought himself incapable of doing, ends this story on a hopeful note.

Writing about what he sees as a considerable problem with Carver criticism, scholar Bill Mullen complains that critics often mistake Carver's "minimalist *style* for absent *content*" (emphasis in the original, 100). A common charge from critics, like James Atlas, concerning Carver's stories is that the idiomatic language and stripped down prose he employs combine with his supposedly thin plots to create stories of utter banality. However, such an assessment overlooks the total effect of what Carver is able to create by combining pared back forms with quick glances into the dulled lives of the American working class. Carver does not often offer epiphanies, instead opting to tell stories where nothing seems to happen, but where much is going on beneath the surface. For critics like Atlas, who expect a turning point, a character being

transformed, Carver does not live up to their expectations of what literature ought to be.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Carver and Pancake are writing about similar kinds of downtrodden people, people who exist at the fringes of society, as part of what O'Connor calls submerged population groups. I believe that O'Connor is on to something when he asserts that such groups are nearly always the subjects of short stories. The lives of Carver's and Pancake's characters are not particularly vibrant or varied. From day to day, they typically go to an unfulfilling job (or are unemployed) and come home to drink, watch television, and argue with their spouses. Given all of this, one can hardly expect that their stories would end with a grand epiphany, some total transformation. And if these stories did conclude in such a way, they would no doubt feel contrived. The inhabitants of Carver Country and Pancake's West Virginia are, without a doubt, members of submerged populations, and these characters and their stories are not ones upon which either extremely talented author could likely have constructed a novel. Thus, in their dedication to the short story form, I believe Carver and Pancake further demonstrate—as they do through their common themes—their understanding of the downtrodden people about whom they write.

CHAPTER THREE

In the previous chapters, I examined the similar concepts concerning the working class that Raymond Carver's and Breece D'J Pancake's stories share, and I also considered these authors' stylistics and how their chosen styles contributed to their themes. Key to both of these examinations was the idea that Carver and Pancake are writing about the American working class, which I contend is a social group that encompasses what Frank O'Connor calls a submerged population. In the final chapter, matters of class will remain a key point, but with my central focus shifted to how Carver and Pancake develop and portray female characters and femininity. In "Tenderhearted Men: Lonesome, Sad and Blue," Vivian Gornick contends that Carver is one of a handful of writers (she also specifically cites Richard Ford and Andres Dubus, but I think Pancake fits here as well) who write a "certain kind of American story," one pioneered by Hemingway, that is "characterized by a laconic surface and a tight-lipped speaking voice" and features a lonely, seemingly emotionless male narrator "made inarticulate by modern life" (32). Beneath this brusque and stony exterior, however, Gornick points out, lies a yearning for "tender connection" and the "expectation that romantic love saves" (32). Indeed, many of the men who inhabit Carver Country and Pancake's West Virginia appear to possess an awareness of their emotions—their loneliness, their desire to be loved. But these feelings are rarely evident in what these characters say (or don't say) or in the actions they take (or don't take). It is this disconnect between thoughts, words, and actions that frequently makes Carver's and Pancake's male characters appear to be unfortunate relics of a bygone era, where men kept a stiff upper lip and women did as they were told. As a result, the male characters for whom Carver and Pancake want readers to feel the most sympathy do not always seem worthy of compassion. Add to all of this the fact that Carver and Pancake are prone to making their female characters less complex

than their male characters and frequently make women the victims of tremendous violence, and it becomes evident that both authors are, unfortunately, often ineffective, or uninterested (intentionally or otherwise) at fairly portraying or adequately representing females in their stories.

This shortcoming in “writing females” on the part of both Carver and Pancake is surprising, given their sympathies for the struggles of the working class. Because working class women face a sort of double oppression due to sex and class, it seems reasonable to expect that both writers might take a more progressive stance with their female characters. Instead, they “obsessively reconstruct . . . male characters in the tradition of the macho hero promoted by American icons like Ernest Hemingway in the first decades of the 20th century” (Zarranz 30). As a result, female characters in both authors’ stories are often presented as being less complex than their male counterparts (or presented as stereotypes), and the inevitability of male domination over females is frequently reinforced, with a tacit acknowledgement of the rightness of this hierarchy.

Carver was known for editing and re-editing his stories until he felt that he had achieved his vision. He even re-worked several of his stories after they had received wide publication. Moreover, in an interview with John Alton shortly before his death, Carver boasted: “I feel I know something about women, and I felt I could be deeply sympathetic, and involved, in taking a woman's point of view” (183). Though we can only guess as to Pancake's confidence in his ability to create female characters, in the Foreword to *The Short Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, James Alan McPherson states that Pancake “rewrote ceaselessly for the precise effect he intended to convey” (9). Given both authors dedication to careful craftsmanship, and Carver's professed

understanding of the female perspective, one cannot simply dismiss both authors' uneven, sometimes caricatured representations of females as being the result of carelessness. I do not intend to psychoanalyze Carver or Pancake, but given that both writers are so meticulous and methodical and yet still manage to write "thin" female characters, or frequently make women targets of violence, it is reasonable to wonder whether Carver and Pancake are misogynists.

While I do not think there is any way that one can completely discredit such an assessment, the water is muddied a bit by a number of instances where Carver and Pancake endow female characters with an emotional depth and complexity that suggests these writers can be, as Carver puts it, "deeply sympathetic" to the plight of women.

"Fat," the first story in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*, demonstrates that Carver possesses the ability to construct a complex female character. In this story, an unnamed waitress is recounting to her friend Rita a haunting encounter she had with an obese patron one evening in the diner where she works. The man was strange, speaking in the third person and keeping his coat on despite complaining of the heat, and gorged himself, putting away slice upon slice of buttered bread in addition to a multi-course meal. For the waitress, the odd, obese man is also notable for his manners. Unlike the "very demanding" table of four businessmen she had been dealing with or her husband and co-worker Rudy, the fat man is patient and gracious, and this makes the waitress attentive to his needs and defensive of him when her co-workers bad-mouth him in the kitchen. But there is something else that draws her to the corpulent patron; however, she cannot discern what it is and is confused by the way her attention to him makes her feel: "I know now I was after something. But I don't know what" (5). Her attentiveness, one must assume, is due to the fact that the waitress sees her powerlessness over her own life reflected in

the obese man's inability to stop eating and his self-conscious admission to her that he would like to control his gorging, but, as he says, "there is no choice" (6). At the end of "Fat," as the narrator is describing to Rita how her husband forced himself upon her later in the evening on the night she served the fat man, the narrator tells her friend: "When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (7). Marshall Bruce Gentry contends that the narrator here is "taking on a more powerful selfhood from the fat man's example" (89). Indeed, the narrator is undergoing a change, which is made even clearer by the story's closing lines: "My life is going to change. I can feel it" (7). It is significant that the narrator does not say that she is going to actively take steps to change her life, but her awareness that her life can change defines her, at least in Carver Country, as a complex character.

A number of the females in Carver's later stories are, like the waitress in "Fat," also in unsatisfying relationships. However, whereas the reader sees the waitress realizing things about her life that may lead to a change or a turning point of some kind, several of the women in Carver's final stories have already realized that their lives need changing and are, as Vanessa Hall puts it, "anything but passive victims, showing a strength, introspection, and creativity rarely seen in the infrequent representations of working-class women in American culture" (66). "The Train," from *Cathedral*, may feature Carver's most empowered female. The story begins with the narrator informing us that the story's protagonist, Miss Dent, had earlier in the evening held a gun on the man who seduced her, then fired her from her job. While the man was on the ground, we are told, she made him "plead for his life," then "tried to make him see that he couldn't keep trampling on people's feelings" (467). It is an astonishing turn for one of Carver's females,

particularly given his narrow treatment of females in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Even more interesting for a Carver character (not just for one of his females) is that Miss Dent is not frozen in a state of inarticulateness: “When she had finished talking, when she had said all she could think of to say to him, she put her foot on the back of his head and pushed his face into the dirt” (467). This is a powerful, albeit disturbing, scene, and it signals a new direction for Carver, with females no longer allowing themselves to be victims. But it is not only through violent acts that we see Carver empowering his female characters. In “Intimacy,” for example, the ex-wife of a writer who has exposed the intimate details of their tumultuous relationship in his fiction, stands up for herself, chastising her husband for his years of mistreating her. He ends up on his knees, clutching at the hem of her dress, and begging for forgiveness. In “Blackbird Pie,” Carver shows what happens when a woman like the unnamed narrator of “Fat” has finally had enough and decides to leave her husband. As in “Intimacy,” the wife in “Blackbird Pie” has the final word, telling her soon-to-be ex-husband, “I’ll write after I’m settled” ... “I think I will, anyway. But first things first. We’ll have to see” (612).

Breece Pancake demonstrates his ability to be empathetic towards women primarily through his mother characters. Two major motifs in Pancake's stories are deceased fathers and the relationship that develops between mother and son in the void left by the loss of the paternalistic figure. Pancake's father died some four years before the young writer's suicide, and his father's death had a painful and lasting impact on Pancake. Moreover, the loss also resulted in he and his mother becoming very close. Pancake seems to have transferred the respect and affection he had for his own mother onto those he constructed in his fiction. Pancake does not make his mother characters strong or empowered, but they are respected by their sons. This is

evident, for instance, in the way that young Colly, from “Trilobites,” is shocked by his impetuosity when he talks back to his mother: “I talked back. I’ve never talked back” (32). Or, in how the protagonist of “Fox Hunters,” Bo, who is only sixteen, has gotten a job to support his mother, who has been more or less incapacitated since “the doctor told her to rest eight years ago, when her husband died” (74). Bo’s mother is obviously fragile and, given that he has to cook, clean, and wait on her, quite a nuisance for her son. Nevertheless, Bo is dedicated to her. On the flip side of these stories showing close, or at least dedicated, mother/son relationships is “A Room Forever,” where Pancake demonstrates the damage that can be caused by the absence of a mother figure. The nameless second mate who narrates the story is a cold and violent alcoholic who, like so many of these hard-boiled male characters, wishes for a meaningful intimate relationship. After picking up a young prostitute, he has a desire to connect with her; he wants to tell her, he says, “about my foster [mother] or the ladies in the welfare offices, and the way they looked at me when they put me on a bus for another town,” but he doesn’t think she would understand him (57). He is rough with the girl as he has sex with her (as in “Fat,” this is a sexual encounter where the female submits more than consents), and when he finds her with slit wrists, near death in an alleyway later that same evening, he merely steps into an adjacent tavern, tells the bartender that “there’s some girl out back tried to kill herself” (59), and heads back to his room. The second mate’s callousness and utter disdain for human beings (especially females) is striking and serves to make him an almost totally unsympathetic character. Pancake, though, attempts to make the second mate more than just an inexplicably perverse monster by showing how he can so readily conjure up the obviously painful images of his surrogate mothers (“the ladies in the welfare offices”) forsaking him. This, of course, is not enough to fully explain the

second mate's misanthropy or misogyny, but it does demonstrate what can happen in the absence of a mother figure.

Overall, both Carver and Pancake are frustratingly inconsistent in how they portray females. In certain stories, Pancake will present a woman as empowered, only to undermine her strength a few paragraphs later. Alena, in "The Way It Has to Be," is one of the only characters in any of Pancake's stories to actually escape West Virginia. She has escaped to Texas to be with Harvey, yet another of Pancake's male monsters, who is on the run from the law. But when Harvey leaves her, she immediately goes looking for a job, an impressive display of determination. However, her excitement at being independent is fleeting. Finding an apologetic Harvey waiting outside her door, Alena "fell against him. 'Nothing's changed,' she said. 'I'm staying here'" (131). Perhaps with the story's title and Pancake's emphasis on Alena's desire to find a cowboy to love her, the reader should not be surprised at the way things turn out. Nevertheless, it is a disappointing turn, especially given that Alena has managed to escape the Mountain State, a seemingly impossible feat for Pancake's characters. For Carver, "The Idea," offers an example of his inconsistency as far as female characters are concerned. This story, which is included in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* only one story after "Fat," features a foolish female narrator. She cannot understand what motivates her to snoop on her neighbors' each night as they perform an odd sex game, though the reader can see, quite obviously, that the narrator is titillated by the voyeurism she engages in. Unfortunately, the narrator is totally lacking in curiosity, insight, or self-awareness, and her total confusion leaves her spouting the kind of puritanical outrage that is associated with the stereotypical scared old biddy: "Someday I'm going to tell that trash what I think of her" (15). Her husband Vern knows his wife will not

say anything, and though he watches with her, he is almost bored by the neighbors' activities. If anything he seems intrigued with trying something to shake up his and his wife's sex life: "Maybe he *has* something there" ... "You don't know" (16). The suggestion here is that Vern possesses a more mature understanding of human behavior and of his own needs than does his wife. In other words, he isn't naive like his wife; he knows a thing or two. Furthermore, the title of the story itself reveals a certain hostility to the hysterical, irrational prude of a narrator, who is clearly not one with a great many ideas.

In addition to sometimes diminishing the intellectual capabilities of female characters, physical violence and verbal abuse, especially by men against women, is common throughout the whole of Carver's and Pancake's canons. In fairness, as realists focusing in on the gritty world of the American working class, one could hardly expect either author to sidestep what is unfortunately a pervasive problem for all downtrodden races and social classes. What makes the violence against women in Carver's and Pancake's stories so shocking is just how frequently such offenses occur. Moreover, it is rather significant that in a number of Carver's as well as Pancake's stories, male protagonists, for whom the reader is evidently supposed to feel sympathy, commit outrageous acts of violence against females that, one assumes, the reader is expected to simply overlook to understand these stories' grander schemes.

Included in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, "Tell the Women We're Going" is among Carver's most disturbing stories, as it concludes with the random murder of two young females. The story's main characters are Bill and Jerry, lifelong friends who have stayed close even as jobs, wives, and children have intervened, replacing the hard-drinking and girl-chasing that had defined their younger days. The reader is told initially that Jerry is a "happy

father of two kids,” but Bill sees things differently, noting that Jerry “was getting to be deep, the way he stared all the time and hardly did any talking at all” (259). The men spend an afternoon at a bar, away from their families, like old times. Afterwards, they go for a drive in the mountains, where Jerry spots and begins to stalk two girls. Bill is ready to go home, but Jerry is not going to let them get away. As the story ends, the narrator tells us that Bill “never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock. Jerry used the same rock on both girls” (264).

Carver gives readers an adequate portrait of the two friends, but nothing that would indicate that Jerry is capable of committing a double homicide while Bill stands idly by. Moreover, Carver’s emotionless prose combined with the fact that he tells us so much about Jerry but next to nothing about the girls—they’re girls, they get killed—contributes to the conclusion that Carver is attempting to offer an explanation for Jerry’s actions. At the story’s outset, we’re told that Jerry is a twenty-two year old high school dropout who is now the assistant manager at Robby’s Mart; his wife has “one in the oven again,” too, despite the fact that they have “too many kids to drag around” (259). Jerry’s life sounds difficult, but Carver’s description of him reads almost like a list a teenage boy might compile when asked to name the cons of adulthood. Many of Carver’s male characters feel suffocated by their jobs, marriages, and children, and though I stated that I did not intend to engage in psychoanalysis, I feel I must mention Carver’s essay, “Fires,” in which he describes much of what has come to form his reputation as a writer who knows his subject from experience. In this essay, Carver describes how hard it was for him and his first wife to make a living through much of their marriage. Neither was educated, or came from families of any considerable means, and they married young. Moreover, they had children early in their marriage, which Carver sees as being a particularly large part of their struggles: “the greatest

single influence on my life, and on my writing, directly and indirectly has been my two children” ... “there wasn't any area of my life where their heavy and often baleful influence didn't reach” (737). That Carver would describe his children's effect on his life as “baleful,” and in print no less, is appalling. Combine this with the many other similarities between Carver's own life and that of Jerry, and it seems quite plausible that Carver, while I would not go so far as to suggest that he is defending the senseless killing of two women, at least hopes readers will understand how hard life can be for modern men. Had Jerry and Bill simply driven home, this would be a typical Carver story, leaving us with the implied menace that makes so many of his other stories intriguing. Instead, this story comes across as immature and macabre, something one might find in a pulp comic book intended for teenage boys.

As with “Tell the Women We're Going,” Pancake's “A Room Forever” can be read, as I noted, as an attempt to offer an explanation for the violence of its male character. The second mate, like Jerry, is endowed with insight and intelligence: Jerry stares off into the distance thinking about how he is stranded in a life he doesn't want, while the second mate broods over women, the miserable lives of the people he meets in the taverns near dockyards, his sad upbringing. But the girl he violates and later finds dying in the gutter remains totally anonymous, and the second mate's refrain—“Nobody here gets breaks” (57)—seems to justify his indifference when he finds her near death. An aspect of Carver's and Pancake's realist visions is that no one is entirely innocent, and the characters they present are pathological, especially ones like Jerry and the second mate. But these men, though certain implied explanations are made for their behavior, are, I believe it is fair to say, intended to be perceived as monstrous.

Where things truly become confusing is in stories that seem intended to have a

redemptive quality, where the reader is supposed to feel sympathetic to the plight of the male protagonist. In “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” Carver brings us into the life of Ralph Wyman, a middle aged man who has been married to his wife Marian since just after they graduated from college. At the story's opening, we're told that Ralph is “enormously happy,” and that he and Marian “considered themselves a happy couple, with only a single injury in their marriage” (173). On the evening the story recounts, Marian brings up the single injury: a one night dalliance she had with a man named Marshall some two years before. Marian reveals that she and Marshall had sex that evening, which Ralph had not known. The conversation is obviously shocking for Ralph, but what is particularly striking for the reader is what is revealed in a brief flashback: “*What did you do that for?*” she was saying dreamily. “*Where were you all night?*” he was screaming, standing over her, fist drawn back to hit again” (emphasis in the original “Will You Please” 174). Kirk Nessel argues that Ralph is “more stable than any other figure” in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and that Carver subjects him to the “most violent, explosive identity crisis of them all (perhaps because he, unlike others, is relatively capable of comprehending his crisis as such)” (308). However, if we consider Ralph outside of the typical characters in Carver's canon, and only within the frame of this story, much of the sympathy we are expected to feel for the cuckolded husband is lost with the revelation that he hit Marian.

Like Ralph, Colly, in Pancake's “Trilobites,” is a thoughtful and complex character, who is also confused by femininity. Colly father has died and his mother is now in charge of the family farm, which frustrates Colly, and she has decided to sell the homestead because it is evident that Colly is not the farmer his father was. His inability to live up to his father's standards—a difficulty that Ralph also had around the same age as Colly—at least as far as

farming is concerned, has led Colly to decide to become a train hopper like his father once was. This desire to become like his father is endearing, as are his enchantment with the natural history of the valley in which he lives and his fossil collecting hobby. Also, Colly seems rather innocent, particularly in his understanding of love, as he still carries a torch for his old high school flame, Ginny, who has escaped West Virginia and moved to Florida to attend college. Colly is upset that Ginny has left, which is evident when he says of a shapely waitress: "Hips and legs like that climb steps into airplanes" (22). Further, he feels ashamed about his infatuation with Ginny, with how much he showed her of himself when they were together. He wrote a love note in her yearbook, which Colly thinks about a lot: "I feel like a real fool for what I wrote" (21). When Ginny doesn't remember the note, it makes Colly "feel way too mean to say anything" (33). It is clear, though, that Colly does not feel rage as much as hurt when talking to Ginny. Readers who have experienced rejection or unrequited love can certainly feel empathy for the sensitive and depressed young man. However, any pretense that Colly is a character for whom we should feel sorry is shattered in the closing pages of the story, when he pins Ginny down and rapes her. Further, the language Carver uses to describe Colly's thoughts makes the scene all the more shocking: "She isn't making love, she's getting laid. I pull her pants around her ankles, rut her" (35). And once the brutality has come to an end, Colly tells us that as he is looking at Ginny: "I can't remember her name for a minute, then it comes back to me" (35). Colly's rapid shift from complicated thinker to rapist, combined with the way his language shifts from being nearly poetic to base and unapologetic when describing the rape, makes his character difficult to understand. "Trilobites" is a coming-of-age story, with Colly shedding his dependence on his mother, learning the truth about love, and making the decision to set off on his own. But we are

left, ultimately, wondering if the smart and sensitive young man, with dreams bigger than can be contained by his little hometown, is going to end up like so many of the other angry, women-hating men we meet in Pancake's stories.

Carver Country and Pancake's West Virginia are male-dominated worlds, where machismo (though this quality seems something that few male characters can genuinely claim) is valued far above femininity. With some exceptions, the women in both writers' stories do not appear to possess the intelligence or complexity of their male counterparts; they are less self-aware, less wise to the world than men. Both Carver's and Pancake's worlds are also places where women are frequently in harm's way, where they are constantly under threat of violence. Moreover, women are not just in danger from the characters who are obviously monsters, but also from those with whom we are intended to sympathize. It is an interesting opposition, Carver's and Pancake's desire to shed light on the grim realities of the lives of the American working class, presumably to give readers a better understanding of this population's struggles, while simultaneously promulgating stereotypical views of women and making exceptions for those who abuse them.

CONCLUSION

When I first discovered Raymond Carver and Breece Pancake, I was working a crap job, as Carver might have called it, and just scraping by, living with three roommates in a moldy house that didn't have heat and squandering any extra cash on six packs of cheap beer. I realize now that at this point in my life, I needed, as Morris Dickstein states it, "a writer who reflected the downbeat mood, the sense of frustration and failure" (509) that I was feeling. Reading Carver's and Pancake's stories allowed me to see that my life could be worse: At least I wasn't a full-blown alcoholic on the verge of bankruptcy and divorce or trapped in the wilds of West Virginia with no money, no car, no hope for escape. I felt sympathy for these characters and also identified with the disappointment and hopelessness they feel; I was as aimless and just as unsure about my future and my goals as many of Carver's and Pancake's characters.

My sympathies for and identification with these characters led me to focus this thesis on the concept of submerged population groups, or, to discard with this clunky phrase, people who have been marginalized and pushed to society's fringes, like those who endeavor to endure and simply survive in Carver Country and Pancake's West Virginia. Given the current conditions in the United States—high unemployment, high foreclosure rates, the widening gap between rich and poor that is effectively destroying the middle class—I think that there is a great deal of insight that can be gained from studying literature, particularly short fiction, for what it can reveal to us about these disenfranchised groups.

Carver's and Pancake's styles and techniques are heavily influenced by Hemingway, particularly his theory of omission. Both writers employ pared back styles, use simple syntax and idiomatic language, and they frequently leave much unsaid, opting as Chekhov asserted writers should do, to say too little than say too much. This leaves readers to fill in the gaps, to come to

their own conclusions about these characters and the meaning of these stories. For some critics, particularly those examining Carver's work, this ambiguity is frustrating. The often flat surface of these narratives indicates to them that absolutely nothing is happening in these stories. But I feel that the opposite is true. Though I think that this technique fails Carver at certain points of his career, namely in the middle period, often the sparseness of these stories is disturbing, as is the feeling of paralysis – that nothing can happen.

When we venture beneath the sometimes flat emotional tone of a Carver story and see that these are characters who are in deep emotional pain, or read Pancake and consider the miserable lives led by those living in the hollows of West Virginia, I believe that it is evident that both authors are deeply sympathetic to human beings suffering through the indignities of poverty. Both writers demonstrate the detrimental effects—desperation, hopelessness—economic hardship has on the working and lower classes. Moreover, they show that those within a submerged group who are already members of a marginalized population are particularly susceptible to the attendant ills of poverty. The women that Carver and Pancake feature in their stories bear the brunt of men's frustrations; they are frequently silenced and they are the victims of brutality. As the powerless males in these stories seek desperately to exert control over something, women are pushed further to the fringes. Unfortunately, Carver and Pancake are, overall, ineffective at presenting complex female characters or adequately representing femininity in their stories.

Despite their shortcomings in terms of how they write female characters and handle femininity, Carver's and Pancake's stories are notable for their unique stylistics and the messages they convey concerning the desperation that plagues the lives of so many Americans. I am

certain that Carver's work will continue to be analyzed and written about for many years to come, but I truly hope that scholars continue to read and study Pancake. For both literary scholars and those interested in class issues, these writers' works present interesting points of departure for larger discussions.

WORKS CITED

- Alton, John. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Literature: An Interview with Raymond Carver." *Chicago Review* 36.2 (Autumn 1988): 4-21.
- Aronowitz, Stanley. *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973.
- Atlas, James. "Less Is Less." *The Atlantic* 247 June 1981: 96-98.
- Barth, John. "A Few Words About Minimalism." *Weber Studies* 4.2 (Fall 1987): 5-14.
- Bowron, Bernard, Leo Marx, Arnold Rose. *American Quarterly* 9.4 (1 Dec. 1957): 377-386.
- Carver, Raymond. "Blackbird Pie." *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- . "Careful." *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- . "Cathedral." *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- . "Fat." *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- . "Fires." *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- . "Neighbors." *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- . "Tell the Women We're Going." *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll

- and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- . "The Idea." *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- . "The Train." *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- . "What Is It?" *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- . "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. Eds. Maureen Carroll and William Stull. New York: Library of America, 2009.
- Cornwell, Gareth. "Mediated Desire and American Disappointment in the Stories of Raymond Carver." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46.4 (Summer 2005): 344-356.
- Dickstein, Morris. "The Pursuit of the Ordinary." *Partisan Review* 58.3 (Summer 1991): 506-514.
- Gentry, Marshall B. "Women's Voices in Stories by Raymond Carver." *CEA-Critic* 56.1 (Fall 1993): 86-95.
- , and William L. Stull, eds. *Conversations with Raymond Carver*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990.
- Gornick, Vivian. "Tenderhearted Men: Lonesome, Sad and Blue." *New York Times Book Review* 16 Sep. 1990: 32-35.
- Hallett, Cynthia W. "Minimalism and the Short Story." *Studies in Short Fiction* 33 (Fall 1996): 487-95.
- Just, Daniel. "Is Less More? A Reinvention of Realism in Raymond Carver's Minimalist Short

- Story." *Critique* 49.3 (Spring 2008): 303-317.
- May, Charles E., ed. *The New Short Story Theories*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994.
- McPherson, James Alan. Foreword. *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. By Breece D'J Pancake. New York: Back Bay, 2002: 3-20.
- Meyer, Adam. "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism." *Critique* 30.4 (Summer 1989): 239-51.
- Mullen, Bill. "A Subtle Spectacle: Televisual Culture in the Short Stories of Raymond Carver." *Critique* 39.2 (Winter 1998): 99-114.
- Nesset, Kirk. *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1995.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "From England to Brooklyn to West Virginia." Rev. of *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, by Breece D'J Pancake/foreword by James Alan McPherson; afterword by John Casey. *New York Times Book Review* 13 Feb. 1983: 24-25.
- O'Connor, Frank. *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*. Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1963.
- Pancake, Breece D'J. "A Room Forever" *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. New York: Back Bay, 2002: 53-60.
- . "First Day of Winter." *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. New York: Back Bay, 2002: 163-170.
- . "Fox Hunters." *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. New York: Back Bay, 2002: 61-82.
- . "Hollow." *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. New York: Back Bay, 2002: 39-52.
- . "The Scrapper." *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. New York: Back Bay, 2002: 101-114.
- . "The Way It Has to Be." *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. New York: Back Bay, 2002: 127-132.

---. "Trilobites." *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. New York: Back Bay, 2002: 21-38.

Runyon, Randolph. *Reading Raymond Carver*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1992.

Zarranz, Libe Garcia. "'Passionate Fictions': Raymond Carver and Feminist Theory." *The Raymond Carver Review* 2 (Spring 2009): 20-32.