

Broken Bottles to Sea Glass: The Evolution of Raymond Carver

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Known for his raw and honest work, Raymond Carver is one of the most significant authors of the twentieth century. Carver, a recovering alcoholic, was not a stranger to emotional turmoil. His own experience helped to craft truthful narratives that explore characters surviving the pressures of everyday life. His new found sobriety influenced a period of artistic growth where he found a brighter outlook in his writing. Although “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” and “Cathedral” were written in the midst of this evolution, Carver stays true to his artistic voice by exploring honest relationships with which his audience can identify. In “What We Talk About...,” Carver brings together two couples enjoying what at first seems like a leisurely afternoon of drinks and discussion. Carver opens the story with his central character, Mel, telling of Terri’s abusive ex-lover Ed. Mel argues, “That’s not love and you know it” (What We Talk About 128). While Mel is initially introduced as a stand up guy, we begin to see the degradation of Mel’s character as he continues to down glass after glass of gin. Throughout the story there is a sense that this doesn’t end well once the friends go home for the night. Carver alludes to the fact the Terri has found a different version of what she left behind with Ed in Mel. “Just shut up for once in your life. Will you do me a favor and do that for a minute?” Mel snaps at Terri, shutting her down and shifting the mood in the room (134). Is this a clue that Mel and Terri’s relationship might not be in the best place? Is Mel most qualified in pointing out Terri’s ex-husband’s faults because he can lay claim to them himself?

In a review of “What We Talk About...” David Kubal describes Carver’s work by stating, “underneath all his stories, many told in an alcoholic haze, lies a sense of betrayal; that life has not fulfilled its early promise of peace, order, and love” (460). Terri attempts to justify the love that her abusive partner, Ed, proclaimed for her. Even after Ed threatens both her and Mel numerous times, drinks rat poison, and shoots himself in the head, Terri still says, “It was love. Sure it’s abnormal in most people’s eyes but he was willing to die for it” (131). She pleads with Mel to admit that, “He loved me. You can grant me that, can’t you?” (130). We see that Terri still has a sense of loyalty to her love for Ed. Carver attempts to show us that Terri and Ed’s relationship started out with the best of intentions, and a bit of the initial tenderness for the other person never goes away. It’s as if Terri feels that if circumstances were different there may have been a chance at love. She sits with Ed as he dies because, “He didn’t have anyone else” (131).

Mel continues to pass the bottle of gin around the table leading to a clue as to why he's been sitting and drinking heavily through the afternoon. Terri states, "He's depressed," and suggests, "why don't you take a pill" (138). Terri has experienced this mood from Mel before, and she seems like a timid child trying to make suggestions to make the problem go away. "I think I want to call my kids," states Mel. Terri quickly reminds him that he'd have to speak to his ex-wife and it's probably not something he wants to do right now (138). The couple has had this conversation before and Terri seems to have witnessed the negative outcome.

Although Mel and Terri's relationship can be frustrating to the reader, Carver paints a portrait of a couple that is visceral and raw. The need they each have for the other is an urge that many readers can relate to. By not softening the characters' dialogue and actions, Carver is able to flesh out characters that seem to lift off the page, breathing with an ugly clarity that, though hard to look at, is compelling and honest. Carver describes his characters as people "I've known all my life. Essentially I am one of those confused befuddled people" (McCaffery 77).

Throughout the piece there is an additional narrative that helps to illuminate a setting and mood. Describing the light filtering in through the room's window, Carver slowly shows how the afternoon is progressing: interpersonally in the room, as well as literally as the sun goes down. It's as if Mel's self-deprecating drinking is sucking the light out of the room, leaving the group in a still darkness by the end of the story. "I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark" (What We Talk About 139).

In an interview on *The New Yorker* podcast, David Means describes Carver's writing reminiscent of, "little shards of narrative glass." Carver's work "Cathedral" possesses this cutting sharpness, but the edges have been dulled a bit. The relationship between the narrator and his wife seems strained but without dialogue to go with it. When the narrator's wife wants to invite Robert, an old friend of hers, to stay with them, the narrator is terribly uncomfortable. "A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to" (Cathedral 209). Even though the narrator has hesitations, he allows his wife to invite her friend to stay a few days with them.

The night begins with "three big glasses of Scotch" and continues with the trio eating dinner, "like there was no tomorrow" (217). They then sit to converse in the living room. There is an animalistic quality to the start of the evening with all three characters devouring their food. The narrator brings out a joint and Robert, the narrator, and his wife all smoke in silence. Soon the narrator's wife is off to bed leaving the narrator alone with a man he's uncomfortable around. As the two men sit together in their marijuana-induced fog, a program about cathedrals comes on the television. The narrator ponders whether the blind man even knows how to grasp the concept of a cathedral and the blind man asks that, "Maybe you could describe one to me?" (224). The narrator does his best but gives up, which gives the blind man an idea. He asks for a sheet of heavy paper and a pen. With the blind man's hand over his, the narrator draws a cathedral to the best of his ability. As they draw together, the blind

man instructs the narrator to, “close [his] eyes now” (227). The narrator continues to draw with his eyes closed and the blind man states, “I think that’s it. I think you got it. Take a look. What do you think?” (227). The narrator suddenly feels an overwhelming sense of place: “My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything” (227). He finally concludes his thought by stating out loud, “It’s really something” (227).

At first glance, “Cathedral” seems simpler than “What We Talk About...” but Carver is able to build a complex narrative by constructing the narrator’s unprovoked aversion to the blind man. The stakes are high because the narrator wants to do what is right by his wife but something is keeping him from feeling comfortable around this stranger. It’s only when he begins to let his guard down and allow himself to see the same way the blind man does that he witnesses a profound shift in perspective. In “What We Talk About...” the light is going out in the room, leaving them in darkness and despair, whereas in “Cathedral” as the narrator shuts out his visual world he begins to see. The hope and optimism that is present in this story is in stark contrast to the feeling of “where do we go from here?” in “What We Talk About...” It’s as if Carver, the man, is seeing his world in a new way that is having a large impact on Carver, the writer. That said, we never lose Carver’s uniquely honest voice.

“Cathedral” was the first story Carver wrote after he finished the collection of stories that “What We Talk About...” appears in. He explains that, “When I wrote ‘Cathedral’ I felt this rush and I felt, ‘This is what it’s all about, this is the reason we do this’” (Simpson 13). Carver seems to have found a new artistic freedom in the optimism he instills in “Cathedral.” In an interview with the *Mississippi Review*, Carver describes writing “Cathedral” as “breaking out of something I had put myself into, both personally and aesthetically. I simply couldn’t go on any farther in the direction I had been going in ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.’ Some of the stories were becoming too attenuated.” Carver seems to be describing the bleakness of characters in “What We Talk About...” (McCaffery 65). Although the characters are fleshed out and believable, the reader is left with a melancholy that’s hard to shake off. In contrast, “Cathedral” provides a glimpse into what we can experience when we open ourselves up to the possibility of seeing our world in a different light.

The pen and paper play a central role in “Cathedral” as the gin does in “What We Talk About...” Carver explains about the weight inanimate objects have in his writing, “if these things are going to be introduced into the scene at all, they shouldn’t be inert. They should make their presence felt in some way” (McCaffery 72). The paper and pen are a catalyst for a shift in outlook. The gin, a numbing agent that clouds the truth and invites a disconnect between the couples. The pen and paper bring two people together and the gin separates them.

The characters in “What We Talk About...” seem to be moving further and further apart from each other as the afternoon fades into night. Mel is once again in a drunk depression and the codependent Terri is left alone worrying about what might happen next. The opposite happens in “Cathedral.” The narrator’s initial aversion gives weight to the ending where he is drawing with the blind man. The simple act of trying something different and venturing out of his comfort zone changes the

narrator's world. Carver gives the sense that the narrator will wake differently the next day, whereas his characters in "What We Talk About..." will be caught in an endless loop of this same scenario. This lingering hope sheds light on Carver's emotional condition at the time, regarding his personal and professional life: "For such a long time when I was an alcoholic, I was very unconfident and had such a very low self-esteem. Every good thing that has happened to me during these last several years has been an incentive to do more and do better" (McCaffery 67). Like the characters in his stories, it seems that putting down the bottle and picking up the pen brought Carver closer to finding a sense of personal truth.

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