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## Optimism and Pessimism in Raymond Carver's Short Stories

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## ABSTRACT

Almost all of Raymond Carver's short stories seem to be similar in terms of themes and style. However, they show a distinctive optimistic or pessimistic approach depending on the time of the author's life in which they were written. This distinction allows us to classify his short stories into two periods; one from his early stories until *Cathedral*, and the second one, including *Cathedral*, until the end of his life. In the following paper, four of those stories, belonging to both periods, are analyzed in order to see if the division made between a positive and a negative Carver is correct, regardless of the similarity of topics and characters, or the difficulties these may face.

**Key words:** Carver, short stories, optimism, pessimism, *Cathedral*, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*

Casi todos los relatos breves de Raymond Carver parecen similares en cuanto a su temática y estilo. Sin embargo, muestran un enfoque optimista o pesimista distintivo dependiendo de la época de la vida del autor en la que fueron escritos. Esta distinción nos permite clasificar sus relatos en dos periodos: el primero va desde los primeros relatos que escribió hasta *Catedral*, y el segundo, incluyendo *Catedral*, hasta el final de su vida. En este trabajo, se analizan cuatro de esos relatos, pertenecientes a ambos periodos, con el fin de ver si la división hecha entre un Carver negativo y otro positivo es correcta, sin importar la similitud en cuestión de temática y personajes, o las dificultades a las que éstos se puedan enfrentar.

**Palabras clave:** Carver, relatos breves, optimismo, pesimismo, *Catedral*, *¿Quieres hacer el favor de callarte, por favor?*



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## Introduction

Raymond Carver has been considered as one of the most influential short story writers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature. Not only was he influential, but some scholars also considered that he reactivated and renewed the short story genre. His works have been praised both because of his style and his themes, since he showed the lives of the American middle and lower working classes. Besides, due to the Minimalistic style employed in his short stories, he was even seen as Hemingway's literary descendant.

Nonetheless, Raymond Carver's short stories seem to be similar throughout his career. The style keeps being Minimalistic, although with some variations; besides, the settings rarely vary between the stories, with middle class characters leading empty, mediocre lives with no meaning. His writings were connected to his own troubled life; he was an alcoholic constantly moving from one city to another, taking underpaid jobs to maintain his family while he wrote stories. That is why, when he stopped drinking and changed for the better, his works changed with him, even though the Minimalistic style was maintained (although it also evolved), and the themes, characters, and settings were still the same.

The difference is in his way of seeing life, which can be appreciated through his writings. If the optimistic or pessimistic atmosphere present in his short stories is taken into account, his works can be divided into two periods: the pessimistic one, from the beginning of his career until he wrote *Cathedral*, and the optimistic one, from *Cathedral* until the end of his life. The endings in the first period leave the reader expecting a despairing future for the characters, whereas the ones in the second period provide hope, even if a brighter future is not directly present in the story.

The purpose of this paper is to see if Carver's evolution towards an optimistic writing can be appreciated through the analysis of four of his short stories. Two of them, "Neighbors," and "The Idea," belong to his first book collection, and therefore, to his "dark" period, and the other two, "Careful," and "Fever," are from *Cathedral*, which marked the beginning of his hopeful writing.

“Neighbors” and “The Idea” have been selected because, even though the themes they show are very similar since they both belong to the same book, and therefore, the same period, the way of approaching those themes is different due to the kind of narrator present in each one. The characters in both works are typical from Raymond Carver’s stories; middle-class couples with a normal, boring life. The problems in the characters’ lives seem to be easy to solve, which could lead to an optimistic ending that allows the reader to think of a better life for them. However, since they belong to Carver’s “dark” period, an analysis of them should show a pessimistic atmosphere, without hints of a brighter future.

“Careful” and “Fever,” on the other hand, have the opposite effect. The problems faced by the characters in these stories are deeper than the ones in “Neighbors” and “The Idea,” and the main characters in both stories have been separated from their wives, although for different reasons. As a result of this, these stories could have had a very obscure atmosphere. Nonetheless, in *Cathedral*, Carver’s idea of life was much more positive, and he had a different perspective, brighter than in his previous works. Therefore, even though these stories may be darker in appearance than “Neighbors” and “The Idea,” they should turn out to be positive, allowing the reader to think of a better future for the characters.

The analysis of these four stories should show that the presence of a positive or negative atmosphere in Carver’s short stories does not depend on the complexity of the problems the characters are facing, or how depressing their lives are. According to the division between a positive and a pessimistic period, the optimism (or lack of it) should be seen through Carver’s way of ending the story and solving (or not) the problems that his characters have to face.



## 1 – Raymond Carver’s Short Stories: Minimalism And Hope(Lessness)

When it comes to placing Carver in a determinate literary movement, critics do not fully concur. His works have been considered to belong to Neo-Realism, White Trash Fiction, Wised-Up Realism, the "Kafkaesque," Post (and Post-Post) Modernism, Existential Humanism, Humanistic Existentialism, Humanist Post-Modernism...even "Grunge" (Johnson 2).

However, in spite of all those labels, most critics have considered him a Minimalist. Minimalism is a movement in which “prose and poetry should be extremely efficient, allusive, and implicative.” (Clark 106). This means that its language has to be as simple and direct as possible, with writers normally omitting elaborate descriptions and avoiding giving more information about a character or setting than what is strictly necessary. As a result of that style, Minimalist works may seem to lack depth, when in fact each of the few words used is full of meaning.

Carver himself disliked being called a minimalist, considering the term just a tag used by critics to put together different writers under one classification. The only one of his works that he thought could be placed under this category is *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Carver *Conversations* 44).

His evolution towards and from Minimalism can be compared to a hourglass with *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* in the middle, where his first and last collections of stories are less minimalistic (Meyer 239) . There are several stories that were revised and republished by Carver throughout the years, such as “The Bath”, first published within *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, which was later changed and renamed, becoming “A Small, Good Thing” included in Carver’s *Cathedral*.

Both works narrate the story of a couple whose child has had an accident, and explore the themes of communication, the lack of it, and feeling connected to others. “The Bath” is more concise, much shorter and the characters are unnamed. However, “A Small Good Thing,” even though it still deals with the same themes, has the story expanded, exploring more the characters’ emotions, giving them names, and it is much more descriptive. The

rewriting of “The Bath” shows how Carver was closer to pure minimalism when he wrote *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* than in his later works.

Some scholars state that Carver’s Minimalist literary style is inherited from Hemingway’s short stories. In an interview for the French magazine *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, he stated that he thought that Hemingway’s quote “Prose is architecture, and the Baroque age is over” suited him (Carver 1987). However, Hemingway’s heroes and his passion for bullfighting did not influence Carver. He even mocked Hemingway in his story “The Aficionados,” where he wrote about Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley, characters from *The Sun Also Rises*.

Apart from his typical heroes, there are other themes in Hemingway’s stories. He was able to describe couple relationships in a way that had not been done before. This other Hemingway, unlike the heroic one, was a big influence for Carver. Two of his favorite Hemingway tales, “Cat in the Rain” and “Hills Like White Elephants” share a theme that, although with variations, is explored in many of Carver’s stories: couple relationships (Bethea 91). This theme, however, is rarely approached in a direct way by any of the two authors. The problems that the couple may be facing and their answers to them are usually told through omission and implication, and lacking a closed ending. Nonetheless, even though Hemingway and Carver shared that way of dealing with couples with problems, their couples and the environment where they were placed was not the same.

The themes in Carver’s short stories fit under the conception of the literary movement known as Dirty Realism. The term was coined by the literary magazine *Granta*, and defined by its editor, Bill Buford as:

The fiction of a new generation of American authors. They write about the belly-side of contemporary life –a deserted husband, an unwed mother, a car thief, a pickpocket, a drug addict – but they write about it with a disturbing detachment, at times verging on comedy. Understated, ironic, sometimes savage, but insistently compassionate, these stories constitute a new voice in fiction. (4)

Carver’s characters are no heroes in the typical connotation of the word; they do not lead lives that would want to be followed by the readers. However, the writer does not judge them directly, and leaves the reader to do it, or rather to avoid judgments. The reader needs to take into account how the problems in the characters’ lives have affected them and

how there is a reason for the inappropriate behavior that they have displayed, which may be inappropriate only in appearance, until the full context behind it is understood.

This way of telling stories allows Carver's readers to find pessimistic and optimistic views in his works without the author showing them openly. Even though his endings are seldom concrete, and they can be interpreted in different ways, a pessimistic air can be noticed surrounding most of his first stories; contrasting with the optimistic note that is present in his last ones.

The main themes present throughout Carver's short stories are materialism and appearance, communication (or more specifically, the lack of it), isolation, loneliness, and alcoholism (Kita 387-392). Drinking, either for fun or because of severe problems with alcohol, is present in some of his most famous stories, such as "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" or "Careful," and in some cases it is the origin of the other problems that the people in Carver's writings face. Even though his characters seem to be lonely and isolated from the rest of the world or from themselves, most of them are married or having a relationship. Generally, apart from alcoholism, if it is present, the lack of real and sincere communication between the members of the couple is what causes their loneliness and gives sense to the story.

Carver's short stories do not show characters belonging to the upper classes, with money or having enjoyable lives that they appreciate. They are members of the middle class, or in some cases, even lower middle class, so appearances are even more important than their own lives, since they have to pretend to be what they are not, and to have what they do not possess. Having to maintain an exterior image towards the society in which they live causes some of the problems Carver's characters face.

Whereas his writing style evolved, Carver's themes seem to be the same throughout his whole literary career. The way of describing his characters and telling their stories changed, but the very essence of it kept being similar. His couples were still having problems of communication, caring about appearances, being lonely, and suffering from alcoholism. Nonetheless, it was the solution and the ending of these problems that changed.

As stated previously, Carver's first stories are far more pessimistic than his last ones. The endings are not clear, and they leave the reader to think that the problems faced by the characters will not be solved but aggravated instead.

The writer himself stated in an interview about *Cathedral* that his style had changed with the writing of this particular collection, marking a boundary between his previous works and the last ones. He considered his new way of writing to be "more generous," and his stories "more hopeful". (Carver "La Quinzaine Littéraire Interview" 8)

This "more hopeful" approach does not mean that his characters stopped to struggle in the stories he wrote from *Cathedral* until his death. The problems they faced were similar, and the lack of communication, isolation and the other themes were still present. The difference is in the endings of those stories, which in most cases lead the readers to imagine a better future than the one predicted when reading Carver's first stories.

## 2 – ‘Living In The Dark’: Hopelessness In Carver’s Early Stories

When you live in the dark for so long, you begin to love it. And it loves you back, and isn’t that the point? You think, the face turns to the shadows, and just as well. It accepts, it heals, it allows. But it also devours.

Raymond Carver, *Late Fragment*

*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* was Carver’s first book collection, although all of his stories had already been published in magazines like *Esquire*. The protagonists of the stories in this collection are middle-class Americans that do not stand out or have anything special in their lives, and who, in the end, quite frequently are seen to “live in the dark.”

In most of the stories in this collection the characters are isolated from their own selves, alienated and dissociated. They do not live the lives they want to follow and are far from accomplishing the so called “American dream.” (Boxer and Phillips 76)

Two of the best examples of this situation are the stories “Neighbors” and “The Idea.” As they both belong to Carver’s first collection, their tone is pessimistic, and they lack the hope that can be found in Carver’s later works. Both stories are similar, with the plot revolving around the relationship between couples and their neighbors, at least on the surface. What is explored is more than that, though, since the characters are not actually living their own lives in neither of the stories.

“Neighbors” starts with Carver rating the couple made by Bill and Arlene Miller as happy. However, it is evident from the beginning that something is wrong with them. It is remarkable that instead of describing the Millers in terms of how they are, Carver chooses to begin talking about how they compare themselves with their neighbors, the Stones, whose life is better, or at least “it seemed to the Millers that the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life” (Carver *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 6).

From the beginning of the story, the lack of communication between the Millers is shown by the narrator. After Bill’s first visit to the Stones’ apartment he omits the details of his visit to his wife. He should have been in the apartment for only a few minutes, as he only had to feed the cat and water the plants. He stayed there longer, though, taking the opportunity to live a life that was not his own for a brief period of time. Instead of

admitting the absence of emotion in his own life and his dislike for it, Bill just tells his wife that he had been playing with the cat and directly touches her breasts without any more conversation.

We do not know whether the Millers' sexual life was in a good or bad stage before the beginning of the story, but Bill gets excited every time he goes to the Stones' apartment. Arlene does not seem to be used to that kind of passion coming from him, as it can be seen when she says "Now? ... What's gotten into you?" (8). Their lack of communication and Bill's refusal to admit what is actually happening in his life are shown again when he does not tell her why he is acting like that and just responds "Nothing." (8).

Bill's actions during his first visits to the Stones' apartment seem to be instinctive, without being thought, as it can be seen when Carver describes his actions: "He found a container of pills ... and slipped it into his pocket" (7), "he sniffed some celery" (8), and "found a half-empty package of cigarettes and stuffed them into his pocket" (8). It is not until his last visit to the apartment that he seems to voluntarily immerse himself into the Stones' life. During that visit, he dresses himself with his neighbors' clothes, both his and hers. While he is doing this, wearing Jim's clothes, he stops frequently to look at himself in the mirror and smile, as if he were picturing himself as Jim Stone. Later, wearing Harriet's clothes, he looks out the living-room window from behind the curtain, this time imagining himself as Harriet instead of Jim (Boxer and Phillips 77)

Arlene's visit to the apartment is not as fully described as Bill's visits are. However, the fact that she forgets to feed the cat and to water the plants, which is what she was supposed to be doing, and the white lint in her sweater (probably coming from the Stones' bed), suggest that she had been fantasizing about having a life that was not her own as much as her husband.

From this point in the story, the Millers could have used this renewed passion and emotion in their lives to reconsider what they had been doing wrong and have a new start. Nonetheless, Arlene forgets the Stones' key inside their apartment, giving an end to their fantasy. The final scene in this story, with the Millers holding each other (11), is not hopeful or optimistic. The fact that the door has been closed for good does not mean that they will stop wishing to be other people now that they do not have the possibility to fulfill

their fantasy. Instead, it leaves the reader wondering whether the Stones will find out what the Millers have been doing in their apartment; or if they will be able to go back to their dull lame life after this.

“The Idea” also deals with a couple whose only source of emotion and excitement is not within their lives, but in their neighbors. However, this short story is told in first person, from the point of view of the wife. For that reason, the way we perceive what is happening is completely different.

The woman is presented by Carver as a prude, quite simple and naïve. Her neighbors have been playing a sex game in which the husband pretends to be a voyeur spying on his wife. The narrator completely despises this behavior, without noticing that she is doing a similar thing by watching them herself. This kind of irony is present throughout the text due to the way in which the narrator tells the story and what she thinks about what is happening.

The woman is so simple that she even needs her husband to explain what is going on with her neighbors, “I almost got on the phone with the sheriff that night, until I recognized who it was out there. It took Vern to explain it to me. Even then it took a while for it to penetrate” (12). Just like it happened with the Millers in “Neighbors,” this couple’s sex life does not seem to be very active, probably because of the woman’s simplicity and naivety. Carver’s choice of the word “penetrate” said by her without any sexual connotations is one of the signs of her lack of sexual appetite.

Whereas the Millers felt excited by their visits to their neighbors’ apartment and found on it an escape from their lives, the narrator in this story seems to use her spying of her neighbors as a mere entertainment, without getting involved at all. She acts simply as a spectator, without any further actions resulting from what she is seeing.

Even though spying on their neighbors seems to be the only exciting thing that there is in their lives, the wife wants to stop it. For her simple puritan mind, her neighbors’ actions are wrong, and she wants to “tell that trash what I think of her” (13). Her husband, on the other hand, appears to be aware that this is the only stimulating thing going on in their lives, and does not want her to make it stop. He might even be trying to suggest her to do something similar, as he tells her “Maybe he *has* something there. ... You don’t know”

(14). The absence of actual communication between them and her way of seeing things stops her from understanding what her husband is really saying.

That lack of action in her and her husband's lives is even present in the food she prepares after watching their neighbors' sex game. The couple does get an appetite after spying them, but not sexual (Boxer and Phillips 78). The foods chosen by the narrator are as plain and dull as her own life, "I got out crackers and peanut butter, cold meat loaf, pickles, olives, potato chips" (14). Not only the foods, but also their colors are dull. Later, the narrator's husband asks her "What about a bowl of corn flakes with brown sugar?" (14). This time it is him who selects the food, but there is no difference from his wife's choice. This might imply that the cause of the couple's monotonous life may not be only the wife, but also the husband.

This story's pessimistic ending is even clearer than the one in "Neighbors." In this case, the narrator's hypocritical actions criticizing their neighbors' sex game without realizing that she is also spying on someone get a punishment. The ants invade their home just like she has been invading her neighbors' privacy. The ant invasion is very important to her and she wishes to tell her husband about it. However, mirroring their lack of communication even when they are both awake, the husband is asleep and she cannot tell him anything about her concerns.

It is ironic that after calling her neighbor "that trash!" (13), ants appear and invade her trash can. Carver is comparing her own incursion into her neighbors' privacy to the ants' incursion into her garbage can (Boxer and Phillips 78). Just like she overreacted when she wanted to tell her neighbor what she thought about her, she overreacts with the ants. Even when "there was no ants left" (15) she just keeps spraying the sink, and before doing that, she had turned on all the lights in the house, exposing herself. They had been in the dark while they were spying on their neighbors, wanting to remain unseen; but in the end, she "raised the shade in the kitchen and looked out" (14). Doing that with all the lights turned on means that anybody could see her, in spite of all the efforts they had made and how she had criticized her neighbor for allowing her husband to watch her from outside their house.



The darkness of the story's atmosphere, since the image portrayed is that of a couple in the dark watching another couple, shows how this story belongs to Carver's pessimistic period. This can also be seen in the ending of the story; in spite of their difficulties, there could be some kind of hope towards an improvement in their lives, or at least a hint for a possible change. Instead of that, it is very clear that Carver did not have any hope in the future of this couple, just like it happened with the Millers in "Neighbors."

These two stories show how negative Carver's tone was in the first part of his literary career. Some elements present in Carver's earlier works form a permanent atmosphere of pessimism in most of his short stories. This is reflected in the monotonous lives that these stories' characters are living, and in their search for emotion and excitement in other people's lives rather than in their own.

They seem to remain indifferent to their lack of a good life, without being fully aware of what they are missing. Due to that indifference and unawareness, they do not try to look for anything new, or pursue an improvement. They are condemned by their own actions to continue exactly as they are, or even to aggravate their situation, because they do not do anything to change it.

In this period, Carver's stories did not offer any kind of hope regarding the future of their characters. There are situations in which they could have solved the problems they are facing, but they do not realize the possibility of change, and let it go. They are trapped in their own lives without any prospect of progress.

The two stories analyzed here deal with similar themes, but told in a different way. Whereas in "Neighbors" the story is told from the outside in the third person, "The Idea" is narrated by one of the characters in the story, which implies a variation in the way the actions of the characters are judged. However, even though the presence of a third person narrator could have offered Carver an opportunity to judge his character's actions, he does not do it, leaving the reader to extract his own conclusions. He does seem to criticize his characters more in "The Idea," not directly through the narrator, since she is not aware of how wrong and hypocritical her actions are being, but through the irony in the whole story. Nonetheless, it is not significant whether the characters' actions are more or less objectionable; the result in terms of the stories' pessimistic tone is the same.

The depressive atmosphere present in most of Carver's earlier stories, as well as the lack of hope for a better future have been related to Carver's own life. He stated on several occasions that his writings had some autobiographical elements, and the way in which he saw his own life at the time is one of them.

When Carver wrote these stories he was like one of these characters; having a dull typical low middle-class life with little expectations of a better future. This influenced his writings, shaping his style. It was not until he quit drinking and started attending Alcoholics Anonymous that his tone changed. He continued writing about unhappy people in domestic situations, but there was a tint of hope for an improvement in their lives present in his short stories.

### 3- 'But Now There Is Light': A New Hope In Carver's Later Stories

There was a deep sea; I was drowning, and I let it embrace me. I was floating and not breathing, and calling it a life.

But now there is light. I can see it. It's time to swim towards it.

Raymond Carver, *Late Fragment*

After writing *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, *Furious Seasons*, and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Carver changed both his style and the tone of his short stories in *Cathedral*. The characters and the themes were similar to those in his previous collections; they keep having problems with communication, and a sense of isolation and loneliness is still present in the stories. However, in this collection, contrasting with the others, there is an atmosphere of hope, understanding, and progress. Carver's minimalistic style also changed; the language remained clear and precise, but the stories became longer, and most of their endings, concluding.

"Careful," in spite of being part of this collection, does not seem to fit under these characteristics. Nevertheless, that impression is obtained if the surface of the story is the only thing taken into account. When a further analysis is carried out, the apparent lack of hope and the seeming absence of progress at the end of the story disappear, showing what this writing is really about.

At first glance, "Careful" might seem rather dark. This story, like most of Carver's writings, deals with the typical themes of lack of communication, isolation, and alcoholism. Lloyd, the main character, has moved out of his house "after a lot of talking-what his wife, Inez, called *assessment*" (Carver *Collected Stories* 441). These words are used to begin the story, giving the impression that Lloyd is not particularly fond of talking about his problems; or talking about anything in general.

This idea is later confirmed when he sees his landlady "lying on her back on the carpet" and "it occurred to him she might be dead" (441). He wants to avoid having a conversation with anyone so much that he does not even try to talk to her to see whether she is dead or alive, and, instead, just stays there watching until she moves and he is certain

that she is still breathing. Moreover, he does not even have a phone, because “he didn’t want a telephone” (442).

He does not only refuse to talk, but also to listen. At first, he had an excuse for not listening to Inez, his wife; “his ear had stopped up with wax. He couldn’t hear anything clearly” (442). Inez wanted to talk about something important, “We have things to discuss, Lloyd. Money is one thing. But there are other things, too” (447). However, once she helps Lloyd with his hearing problem, he chooses not to listen to her deliberately, “... she turned and said something else to him. He didn’t listen. He didn’t want to” (450). It seems that, just like he refuses to have a telephone because he does not want to have one, he also refuses to listen to his wife, considering her like the telephone, an inanimate object, avoiding any kind of important conversation as long as he can.

This isolation from the outside world increases with Lloyd’s alcoholism. It seems that this is the reason why he left his house; in order to recover from his addiction. Nonetheless, his obsession is getting worse instead of improving. He tries to fool himself and Inez, telling her “I’m trying to cut back” (447), when in fact his addiction is increasing. Instead of quitting alcohol completely, he had tried to continue drinking, but only champagne, thinking it would make a difference. However, “in no time he found he was drinking three or four bottles a day” (447). He does not look for a solution for his problem, and even though “he knew he’d have to deal with this pretty soon. But first, he’d have to get his hearing back” (447), he continues drinking after his ears are cured.

At the end of the story, it looks as if he is going to continue drinking without caring about his own or his family’s future. It is revealed that he and Inez have children, but he does not mention or think about them in the whole story apart from when he is explaining Inez the problem with his ear. He has become so pathetic and declined so much that “he held the bottle by its neck as he drank. He wasn’t in the habit of drinking from the bottle, but it didn’t seem that much out of the ordinary” (451). His life is not advancing and the only thing he is doing is drinking directly from the bottle, without even bothering to clean and use a glass. He was supposed to deal with his alcoholism after his hearing problem had been resolved; but even after he can hear, he chooses not to do anything.

With these problems, and this ending, "Careful" may not look different from Carver's earlier works. It presents a character whose life is far from good but does not anything to change it. However, as opposed to the stories in Carver's previous collections, "Careful" does not hint that this character's life will continue downhill. If the main events in the story are seen as a metaphor, Carver's approach appears to be much more optimistic here than in previous collections.

Lloyd's attempt at solving his hearing problem represents how he had been trying to solve every problem in his life. Having wax in his ear was a very simple problem with an easy solution, but his way of solving it made it more complicated than what it really was. When he realized that his methods were not working, he had been just "now and again slamming his head with his fist" (442). He needed Inez's help to solve it, even though it was very simple to do it. Inez's way of dealing with Lloyd's problem, carefully, is what finally gives Lloyd the capacity of hearing properly again.

As time passed in his life, Lloyd's way of solving conflicts should have evolved, but it has not. He compares the sensation he has with the wax blockage as what he felt when he "used to swim near the bottom of the municipal pool and come up with his ears filled with water" (444). The only thing he had to do then was "blow out his cheeks and force air into his head" and then "he'd have the pleasant sensation of water running out of his head" (444). However, instant solutions do not work for him anymore; he has to be patient and careful in order to find an improvement in all the aspects of his life. If the hearing problem is seen as a metaphor, the fact that it is cured in the end could mean that Lloyd will eventually get out of the self-destructive spiral in which he is, controlling his life again.

Another element that suggests an optimistic tone in the story is the fact that, in order to heal him, Inez asks him to "tilt your head all the way to the side now" (448). While he is in that position, he thinks that the new perspective " ... wasn't any different from the old way of looking, except that everything was on its side" (448). However, even though Lloyd does not really see it in that moment, Carver might be suggesting that, through seeing things with a new perspective, his life will be better just like his hearing problem was cured.

The fact that a possibility of improvement in the main character's life is hinted by Carver proves that this story is not as pessimistic as the ones appearing in his previous collections, showing an evolution towards a more optimistic approach in Carver's writings.

"Fever" is another short story from *Cathedral* in which the main character faces a turning point in his life. In "Careful," the turning point was Lloyd moving out of his house in order to overcome his problems with alcohol without affecting his wife or his children. In "Fever," the main character, Carlyle, has also started living without his wife, in this case, because she abandoned him. Nonetheless, he is very different from Lloyd; his wife has left him because she was "going for it" (479), putting her career as an artist before him and their children.

Carlyle's main problem is the fact that he has not been able to move on and assume that his wife is happy living his new life in California and she is not going to come back. He needs someone to express his feelings on the topic, but, like many of Carver's characters, he has problems with communication.

Since he was left by Eileen, he has not dealt with his real problems, putting other things first so he did not have to care about anything else. During the summer, right after Eileen had left him, "every day and every night he'd attended to the children" (474). He had been focusing all of his attention on his children, without giving himself time to accept that his wife was not going to return. "He understood that his life was entering a new period" (474), but it seems that, even though he was aware of that, he did not want to accept the situation and get over it.

His problems communicating with the rest of the world and expressing his feelings are related with the absence in his life of someone to trust. This lack of trust is reflected when he is trying to choose a babysitter. He had rejected the first person that the employment service he had contacted sent because he did not want her around his children, even though he needed someone since the school year was about to start. However, when he hired Debbie "in his desperation to find someone" (474) she turned out to be an irresponsible girl in the end, making Carlyle even less willing to trust anybody.

After what happened with Debbie, Carlyle decides to call Carol, "the woman from school he'd been seeing for the past month" (476). She could have been the person to trust

with his problems and the one to listen to what he had been keeping inside, but Carver presents her as a woman whose words are hollow, full of clichés and lacking actual emotion (Fachard 11). When describing the conversation Carlyle had with her, it is mentioned that “Her voice sounded indistinct” (476), so, even though she tells Carlyle “he shouldn’t be afraid to say when he needed affection” (476), she does not actually offer him a real chance to open up. It is ironic that he needs to be told that because, since he is an art teacher, he is supposed to know that there is nothing wrong in expressing himself, and he should know how to do it.

His reaction to Eileen’s letters also shows how he is unable to communicate with or trust her. She has changed since she left him, and he still remembers the old Eileen, refusing to accept the new one because the old Eileen was the one that had been with him, and the new, the one who abandoned him. Eileen’s way of speaking sounds foreign to him, and “he thought that Eileen must be losing her mind to talk like that” (479). She pretends that she is there for him, saying “We have to keep all lines of communication open” (482), but she does not really talk properly about anything important to Carlyle or the children. She only tells him to “think positive thoughts” because “you sound depressed” (481), which does not actually help him at all.

Even though she has decided to abandon him and she is the one who put him in the situation of having to find someone to take care of the children while coping with her absence, Eileen puts him in contact with Mrs. Webster, finally solving his problems.

During their first conversation, over the phone, Carlyle tells her “I’d like to be able to count on you,” to which Mrs. Webster answers “you can count on me” (483). Hence, from Mrs. Webster’s first appearance, Carver hints that she is the trustworthy person that Carlyle needed in order to express how he feels about the whole situation.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Webster’s presence and the fact that she takes care of the children perfectly mean that Carlyle no longer has a distraction from the deepest problem in his life, and he has to deal with it. He tells Mrs. Webster “I really feel a hundred percent better” (485), and he later tells Carol “I feel light-years better than I did this time yesterday” (485). He is finally happy, inviting Carol to his house and refusing to pick up the phone thinking it

might be Eileen. However, he is still repressing his feelings about Eileen, and the problems derived from that come back to him in the form of the fever he gets.

Mrs. Webster takes care of him just like she had been taking care of the children, and once he is feeling better, she lets him open up to her about his thoughts and feelings about his wife abandoning him. After she tells him that she is going to move to Oregon, instead of breaking down, he starts telling her everything he had been keeping inside. She listens to him, understanding the importance of the moment and making the children and her husband be quiet so he can speak freely. She tells him "Sometimes it has to be talked about ... And you're going to feel better afterwards" (495), which is exactly what happens, since she cures both the fever and the distressing feeling he had inside him.

Even though he had seemed to move on before that, letting Carol into his life and not answering Eileen's phone call while he is with her, the reader does not feel that he has accepted his new life until the moment when he finally talks about everything that has happened with Mrs. Webster.

If this story belonged to Carver's previous collections, in the end, when Carlyle finds out that he is going to be left without a trustworthy babysitter again, his life would have started to go downhill again. There would not be any sense of improvement in his life, and the story would be quite pessimistic. Nonetheless, "Fever" is in *Cathedral*, which marked Carver's change towards a more optimistic approach in his works, so the ending is positive. The fact that Carlyle has finally been able to move on is not only hinted, but directly stated by Carver, saying that "he understood it was over, and he felt able to let her go" (496).

Both "Fever" and "Careful" deal with a central masculine character that has been separated from his wife and is trying to cope with it. Lloyd and Carlyle are very different, since it is Lloyd's fault that he has to live without his wife, whereas Carlyle's has left him to follow her dream, not directly because of him. Probably due to that main difference, "Careful" is darker than "Fever," and the optimistic notes in the story have to be "carefully" looked for. Nevertheless, despite their differences, both stories show a more hopeful side of Carver that was not present in his other collections. These two stories could have been darker than "The Idea" and "Neighbors," since the characters in those two are just having problems with a dull marriage, whereas in "Careful" and "Fever," the marriages have



already been broken. The lack of communication and the sense of isolation appear in the four stories, but the impression that these problems will be overcome is only present in the ones belonging to *Cathedral*.

## Conclusion

The analysis of these four stories has proved the distinction in terms of optimism and pessimism between the beginning and the ending of Carver's writing career. It is evident that Carver's life influenced this difference, since, as he stopped drinking and started having a more balanced life, his writing became much more hopeful, fact that he himself recognized.

The difference between the stories from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and the ones from *Cathedral* may not be evident at first sight. The four of them show similar characters with empty lives who are not succeeding, but the fact that the characters in the stories from *Cathedral* seem to have worse lives than the ones in the first stories is significant. In "Neighbors" and "The Idea," the problem is just that the characters have a simple, mediocre life, and they do not seem to be looking for a solution. On the other hand, the characters in "Careful" and "Fever" are facing harder problems, such as strong alcoholism or having been abandoned by their wives.

Nevertheless, even though the problems presented in the stories from *Cathedral* seem to be more difficult to solve than the ones in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, the analysis of these four stories has proved that "Careful" and "Fever" are much more optimistic than "Neighbors" and "The Idea." The optimism, however, is not in the themes, characters, or settings, since they are still similar, but in the endings. This is why it may not always be clear if a story provides an optimistic or pessimistic view, because Carver's endings do not usually provide a clear conclusion of the story, but rather one that allows the reader to interpret it more or less freely.

The pessimistic view in "Neighbors" and "The Idea" has turned out to be more obvious than the optimistic one in "Careful." Whereas the negative atmosphere present throughout "Neighbors" and "The Idea" can be seen with a simple superficial analysis, finding a positive tone in "Careful" may be more difficult at first sight. The ending does not provide an evident hopeful sign that allows the reader to think easily of a better future for the main character where he recovers and starts a better life. However, the analysis of the text, seeing the main events in the story as a metaphor, has proved that "Careful" is not an

exception in Carver's optimistic period. "Fever" has also shown how positive about life Carver's writings were in this period, since, unlike in "Careful," the brighter future for the main character is directly present in the story, and it can be seen even more evidently than the pessimistic tone in "Neighbors" and "The Idea."

Therefore, this analysis of four of Carver's stories has shown that there is an unequivocal distinction between Carver's early stories and the ones that he wrote for *Cathedral*. The optimistic or pessimistic approach may not be evident at first sight, but it is clear that there is a contrast between the writings belonging to the period in which he was an alcoholic and his life was going downhill, and the works he wrote while he was starting to recover.



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