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Raymond Carver: His Use of Conversation in His Stories

Raymond Carver, spinner of terse tales on the working class poor, uses a simplistic writing form which does not include great descriptive paragraphs of background, passionate speeches or grandiose endings. Classified as a minimalist by some standards, Carver uses conversation to set the mood of a story, signify defining moments in a character's life, or to allude to the eventual outcome or fate of his characters.

Choosing not to spoon feed his readers with detail, Carver uses dialogue to enable readers to feel the mood and to create character's history. Leo and Toni, the principal characters in Carver's "Are These Actual Miles?" do not directly address their marital problems in the story. Readers sense the tension between the characters by the tone used in the conversation. Early on, we learn through dialogue that Toni is being sent out to sell the couple's car due to financial difficulty. There is an easily discernible patronizing tone in the way Leo is instructing Toni on the art of negotiating, and Toni's snappish response to Leo is "You're nothing" (96), reminding him that it is his financial inadequacy causing their financial trouble. As the story progresses, tension builds as Toni does not return home, and the conversations between Toni and Leo grow thick with suspicion as Toni telephones home occasionally to make excuses for her absence. Readers feel Leo's desperation only through his reaction to Toni when she calls, and are reminded of a moment earlier in the story when Leo promises that "Things,are going to be different. We start over Monday. I mean it" (98). Through their conversation, the reader feels not only the troubled relationship, but senses a couple struggling with civility and the question of rebuilding a future together.

Another common element in Carver stories is the moment of truth -- an epiphany of sorts -- that at least one character experiences in each story. Staying true to his simple minded characters, Carver uses only a word or phrase to indicate that the character has been affected in some way. There is no brilliant soliloquy or emotional outpouring, only a simple indicator in the conversation that the character has

experienced a defining moment. As John Clute observes, "there is no condescension. No moment of epiphanic wisdom couched in terms to which his subjects could never lay claim" (62). Readers are privy to the emotions of the characters only through Carver's use of simple, spare conversation, matching the simple intellect of his characters.

"Cathedral" exemplifies this observation. A nameless narrator meets an old friend of his wife's, a blind man named Robert. The reader follows the story as the pre-conceived notions of the narrator about the blind are shattered, primarily through conversation between the two characters. One notable scene between the narrator and Robert takes place as the two share some time together at the television, where the narrator feels obligated to discuss his viewings with Robert. At one point, the narrator mentions to Robert that the camera is focusing on an Italian cathedral's paintings. Robert asks "Are those fresco paintings, bub?" to which the narrator can only respond "That's a good question. I don't know" (277). Through dialogue such as this, readers observe that the narrator is slowly realizing that his knowledge is limited as compared to the blind Robert.

In the end, the narrator is taught by Robert to experience a different kind of "vision" when he aids the blind man in drawing a cathedral with his eyes closed. The reader senses that a wisdom of sorts has overcome the narrator, but Carver uses only the simple, spoken line "It's really something" (279). In that phrase, the reader senses the emotions that the narrator is experiencing. Were it not for that line, the reader may not realize that a change has taken place as the cynical, simple minded narrator has experienced something that touches him in a unique way.

The epiphanic moment in this and other Carver stories lends itself to Brad Hooper's comment that "it's not what Carver put in a story so much as it is what he left out" (7). By not explaining the emotions of a character, Carver permits the reader to personalize a story with their own real life experiences or situations, creating what Hooper refers to as a "universal human experience" (7). Readers absorb the words spoken between characters and are permitted to interject their own perceptions or motivations into the actions of the characters.

Lastly, it is through conversation that the reader has the opportunity to draw conclusions as to the outcome of the story or fate of the characters. Mars Jones notes that "endings . . . are bound to be a

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