

Dirty Realism in Carver's Work

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DOI:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n22p385

Abstract

Dirty realism is the fiction of American authors who write about the dark side of contemporary life. Raymond Carver is one of the best representatives of this generation. His stories constitute a new voice in fiction. In fact, he writes about ordinary things in a simple language that depicts the pain and suffering rather than hope. His literary world reflects the chaotic life of his characters which results in short stories about unhappy marriages and people who continue living a futile life just because there is nothing else left to do. Carver's aim is to convey through language and symbols the special moments when these people's empty lives are separated from chaos. These stories are set in the North-Eastern part of the Pacific Ocean and revolve around the lives of farmers, alcoholics, secretaries, mechanics and other ordinary people. They appear in familiar surroundings and focus on trivial issues and what is more they are endowed with subtle descriptions of objects given through regional dialect. It is his skill to understand and portray the sensations of the characters that shows how the real life of common people in the years '70s and '80s in the USA really was. In this paper I intend to make a detailed analysis of the features of this dark realism in Carver's work.

Keywords: dirty realism, chaotic, symbols, trivial issues, regional dialect

Introduction

There are authors who are verbose and others who are spare. Not only does Raymond Carver fall in the latter category, he is also the master of the understatement. In fact, he is considered as one of the greatest short story writers of the 20th century (it has been said that he revitalized the short story form by the time he died in 1988). He wrote to the literary movements of minimalism and dirty realism. His fiction explores grief, loneliness, infidelity, insecurity and escape.

The "dirty realism", which deals with middle-class characters and is focused on the harsh realities of their ordinary lives became popular in the 1980s. It was *Granta*, a highly regarded literary journal which coined the label dirty realism in 1983 for which Buford wrote an explanatory introduction:

"Dirty realism is 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."

It is the dirty realism that describes a writing style whose aim is to create realistic and sad destinies. Dirty Realism is often about people living a sad lifetime with problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, divorce. It is a form of minimalism characterized by a reduction of words and a focus on surface description. Authors like Carver avoid using adverbs and prefer allowing context and in that way there will be less to interpret on our own compared to Minimalism. The characters in dirty realist stories and novels tend to be ordinary, unremarkable people, often with few resources and little money.

What is typical about "dirty realism" is the distinctive style characterised by sparse prose, simple language, and direct descriptions of ordinary people and events. For instance, the opening of the stories is too simple: "This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night."¹ Its characters are unexceptional and live in unexceptional situations. They all live in the cities and the majority are workers, adulterers, alcoholics, women or ethnic minorities, people who experience estrangement, loneliness and disillusionment every single day of their lives. As a result, they have become

¹ Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989.

tough, their dialogues are elliptical. The metropolitanism is gone to give way to the rural American and often inarticulate, unsophisticated protagonists. These working poor people have to sell their labour or even their bodies in order to survive and who might at any time lose everything, including the basic dignities that make human beings human.

Dirty realism focuses on the sadness and loss in the everyday lives of ordinary people – usually lower-middle class or marginalized people. Raymond Carver is the author who epitomizes the dirty realism with his condensed, terse and graceful stories. He successfully employs omissions, uses spaces between the words to give a sense of evanescent and elusive feelings. The style is colloquial and conversational especially in the story "The Cathedral": "She read stuff to him... that sort of thing." There is a lack of obvious imagery or metaphor: "In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed." There is repetition – "this blind man", "a blind man", "the blind man"; and overuse of pronouns, with many instances of 'he' and 'she'. It is flat and spare: "His wife had died, so he was visiting the dead wife's relatives." There is a sense that the prose is somehow constricted, as is the narrator himself: the restrictive style mirrors the narrator's restricted views on life. Carver said of his prose style, "Prose is architecture. And this isn't the baroque age."¹

1. The Characters, Language, Style in Carver's Works

His focus is on the simple ritual of everyday life by giving all his attention to the concrete and avoiding all possible abstractions. In his short stories he describes emotions, disappointments and relationships with simplicity and stoicism. In them, the characters are ordinary, in unremarkable occupations, and often lack money, something that becomes the reason for an internal desperation. They are depressed, without education or prospects, but who fail to give up even when it would be in their best interest.

It is difficult to read about the characters personalities, actions, and flaws- to distinguish between the characters mistakes and who they were as people. Did Carver intend them to be viewed as protagonists or antagonists? In these messy stories, it is clear that he develops his characters so that no person is completely innocent or guilty. Unlike the works of many other writers, Carver leaves it to the reader to decide, who, if any of these people, is truly a victim or villain. In asking his readers to go deeper into the psyches of his characters, the reader is encouraged to evolve alternate methods of viewing certain lifestyles, choices, and mistakes. The readers finish these stories recognizing that passing judgment on others is too simple.

Carver has taken the "dirty" reality of day-to-day life and explored it. His characters feel like real people, their lives look like real lives, their relationships are complex and personal. The story Signals is a perfect example. It opens with Wayne and Caroline being seated at a new, expensive restaurant owned by a mysteriously famous European man named Aldo. All seems nice, they're excited. Slowly, things unravel. Wayne was upset and starts complaining about poor service that isn't. Then he's projecting angry, disconnected emotions on Aldo, the server, and other patrons. Finally, the reader gets to see the heart of it: Wayne and Caroline's marriage is in serious trouble (and Wayne feels it's her fault).

"They looked at each other as they drank.

'We ought to do this more often, ' he said.

She nodded.

'It's good to get out now and then. I'll make more of an effort if you want me to.'

She reached for celery. 'That's up to you.'

'That's not true! It's not me who's...who's...'

'Who's what?' she said.

'I don't care what you do, ' he said, dropping his eyes.

'Is that true?'

'I don't know why I said that, ' he said" (223).

It gets deeper and deeper and ends unresolved. It's not classic short story form: it's true-life. There's no "magic, " in it but it still can engage the reader. "I'm against tricks that call attention to themselves in an effort to be clever or merely devious,

¹ Sklenicka, Carol. Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life. New York: Scribner, 2009.

" he said to one interviewer. "I'm not interested in works that are all texture and no flesh and blood. I guess I'm old fashioned enough to feel that the reader must somehow be involved at the human level."¹

Carver's work is the narrative of the middle-class. It focuses on contemporary fashion, on our culture's obsession with looking good and being hip, on the trendiness of dance clubs and jeans and alcohol and drugs and sex and on our consumer society packed with brand names. Carver is the writer who believes that the reader can smell, see, and touch. Moreover, we find a narrative that believes in its own logic: in chronology, in plot, in psychology, in selfhood. This is the universe where content is privileged over form and where language is transparent.

Carver's use of first person narrative, ambiguity, epiphany, and symbolism are the technical aspects explored that emphasize the plight of the foreclosed and diffused character who must break free of the bonds of passivity by stepping forward into moratorium. What he does in his stories is combine weariness with wonder, cruelty of life with a moment of relief. In order to achieve that he avoids [adverbs](#), extended [metaphor](#) and [internal monologue](#), instead allowing objects and context to dictate meaning.

The characters in his fiction are exhausted with life. Their dialogue is spare and elliptical. It is usually cynical and ironic, concerned with what is below the surface, with the disjunction between what is said and what is meant. The stories are short on plot, short on action, short on explication, sometimes as fractured and dislocated. Arthur Saltzman calls Carver the "Connoisseur of the Commonplace." He claims that Carver depicts the cramped conditions of working-class existence with genuine sympathy and authority. He also points out that Carver's work is characterized by an avoidance of extensive rumination. He uses short sentences and sparse dialogue to effectively highlight the silencing of the working class. As writer and critic Brian A. Oard puts it: The Carveresque image allows the reader to glimpse the terrible waste of his characters' lives (something the characters themselves can sometimes feel but rarely see) and forces the reader to reconsider the entire story in the image's dark light.

His stories are short, his language is stark, his characters are uncomplicated and his symbols are basic. None of this, however, implies poverty of meaning as Carver's short stories are about the meaning of life, the meaning behind relationships and the meaning underscoring human action (Hallett, pp. 488-89). As Carver himself explains in "On Writing, " short stories are "glimpses" of life and, more importantly, "illuminating" glimpses² (p. 17). In other words, from Carver's point of view, even though they are nothing more than a brief glimpse at a particular moment in life, short stories illuminate one's understanding of life, insofar as they are focused, concentrated and in-depth 'glimpses.'

2. Major Themes

Carver repeats several essential themes that coincide with the reading of most stories in his work.

2.1 Delusion

In the majority of Carver's stories characters are unaware of the truth. Sometimes this is implicit, while other times it is very clear.

In "Feathers, " Jack and Fran are not happy but realize it only when they visit Bud and Olla. They understand the isolation that reigns in their lives and try to change that by having a child.

In "Chef's House, " Edna and Wes pretend that they are changing their dull lives through their vacation at Chef's. But that will end one day and they will have to face their problems again.

In "Careful, " Lloyd believes he is recovering from his alcoholism, even though he drinks champagne for breakfast. This is another delusion in his life.

In "Fever, " Carlyle convinces himself that he is over Eileen, but it's not until his sickness brings out his confession to Mrs. Webster that he realizes how much he has been tied to the past.

In "The Bridle, " Marge is not aware of how unhappy she is. But she lacks the strength to see her loneliness and tries and befriends Betty, instead relying on a pretense that her job is important and that her identity as a stylist is meaningful.

¹ Carroll, Maureen and Stull, William L. Remembering Ray. Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1993

² Carver, Raymond. "On Writing." Fires: Essays, Poems and Short Stories by Raymond Carver. Santa Barbara: Carver Press, 1983.

In "Cathedral," on the other hand, the narrator does not confront his loneliness. Instead, he turns his unhappiness towards others, attacking people even for their disabilities (as with Robert). It's not until Robert forces himself into the narrator's life that the latter realizes he is lonely and desperately seeks more from life.

2.2 Change, Insecurity, Control, Conflict

In Jerry and Molly and Sam it can be noticed the theme of change, insecurity, guilt, control and conflict. The story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator. Carver explores the theme of insecurity. Al, the main protagonist in the story, is worried about his job in Aerojet. Though he has been there for nearly three years, he still knows his job is not secure. Carver also explores insecurity again later in the story when Betty (Al's wife) tells Al that 'It's us! It's us! I know you don't love me any more –goddamn you! – but you don't even love the kids.' Not only is Betty insecure but what she tells Al also highlights the idea of conflict (internal) within Betty.

The theme of conflict is explored in the story when the reader discovers that Al is having an affair and that 'he didn't know what to do about it.' Again this would be an internal conflict (for Al). The other theme, that of change is also noticeable several times in the story. First there is the fact that Al believes by getting rid of Suzy (his lover), it will be the beginning of a positive change in his life. He knows he needs to change, though he is misguided to believe that by getting rid of Suzy, it will be the right change. There are also other examples in the story that highlight the lack of change in Al's life. First there is Molly in the bar. After Al leaves and is driving to Jill's house, Carver tells the reader that Al felt 'if he'd been in a different frame of mind, he could have picked her up.'¹ This is significant as it highlights that Al hasn't changed. The reader will recall that he picked Jill up in a bar. He is doing the exact same thing again (no change) but this time with a different woman. The other incident in which there is no change is more symbolic. After he has had his shave, Al decides to have a shower and doesn't change his clothes. This further highlights that not only does Al need to change clothes (he slept in them) but he also needs to change his life (stop having affair). However, in all probability he won't.

There are also several examples in the story which suggest to the reader the theme of control. There is the fact that Al is aware that he needs to reshape his life. He incorrectly believes that the first step in regaining control of his life is by getting rid of Suzy. Also the reader is aware that Al is having an affair with Jill. Though the narrator tells the reader that Al didn't know what to do about it, it further suggests an awareness (from Al) that not only does he need to change but he has to look at this affair with Jill in order to again, regain some sort of control in his life. Jerry, the barman in the story, though he is only briefly mentioned, is also significant. Significant because he can fix Molly's washing machine motor. This in some ways mirrors what Al is trying to do, he is trying to fix his life, to regain control over it.

The ending of the story is also significant as it suggests the theme of guilt, conflict and change. As Al is driving and looking for Suzy, it is obvious that he is continuing to feel guilty about having abandoned her. The narrator tells the reader that Al felt that 'A man who would get rid of a little dog wasn't worth a damn.' Just after this statement the reader learns that Al, 'He knew the situation was all out of proportion now but he couldn't help it.' Not only does this suggest an internal conflict within Al but on a different level it also suggests that Al is fully aware that there is a need for change in his life and getting rid of Suzy was not the type of change that Al needed. It also suggests a lack of control as Al isn't able to control what is happening in his life.

Carver closes the story with symbolism, for change. The reader is already aware that Al considers Suzy to be stupid. However, despite his opinion of Suzy, Al is relieved to have found her, 'he didn't feel so bad, all things considered. The world was full of dogs. There were dogs and there were dogs. Some dogs you just couldn't do anything with.' The last statement in the story is important as it not only suggests that Suzy will remain the same but also possibly Al too, despite his awareness and wish to control or change his life, he may not actually do so.

2.3 Isolation/Loneliness

Most of Carver's characters are separated from others, either physically or emotionally. Sometimes they are aware of this, while some others are unaware of how much their loneliness affects them.

¹ Collected Stories .New York: Penguin Group, 2009.

In "Feathers," Fran and Jack live apart from others. They don't have much social interaction, and Fran attempts to stop them from visiting Jack's friend. Where Bud and Olla are also isolated physically, they nevertheless seem to be entirely happy in their world. The idea of having a child makes them further apart from one another.

In "Chef's House," both Wes and Edna live lonely lives. Edna talks only about having a "friend" who she leaves to join Wes. Their relationships with others hold little weight, and so they try too hard to have what they've lost from one another. They are even isolated from their children. This is what drives them to try to create a kind of relationship but that unfortunately does not result as such.

In "The Compartment," Myers lives an isolated life in which he sees few people. His trip to Europe represents an attempt to reconnect with others, but he spends most of his time in Europe alone, and ultimately decides he doesn't want such reconnection at all.

In "A Small, Good Thing," Ann and Howard are separated from one another even though they don't realize it. Ann recognizes late into Scotty's hospitalization how she feels distant from Howard, and they grow closer through the experience. The story illustrates how far away from each other humans are through the many doctors the parents encounter. Their reunion at the baker is so haunting especially when the three people share their loneliness.

In "Vitamins," all the characters are lonely. They want to be somewhere else, away from a life where their only friends are those with whom they work. Patti and the narrator live together but are emotionally separated from one another.

"Where I'm Calling From" is a story about a character who learns to accept himself. He refuses to call his girlfriend from fear of learning bad news, but the story ends with him deciding to try and connect with others hoping to help himself.

"The Train" has three characters. Miss Dent doesn't know anything about the people in the train station. Each one of them hopes to disappear into the anonymity of the late night train to address their own problems.

In "Fever," Carlyle's issue is the loneliness he feels since Eileen left. Carol is only some comfort, since she has her own problems.

"The Bridle" is set in a landscape of loneliness. The apartment building is far away from life, and the characters are so separated that they play games to win divorces. Marge, so lonely with Harley, wants badly to have a friend in Betty.

In "Cathedral," it is portrayed the individual isolated from others for several reasons. The narrator drinks too much and seems unable to communicate with his wife. The wife has earlier tried to commit suicide because of loneliness. Only the blind man, Robert, seems able to form lasting human connections. Though a blind person, he can be so interesting to talk with, he is able to see and understand beyond what others can see. The blind man was able to unravel the truth out of the husband. He realized his weakness as a lover to the wife. The blind man's touch connotes that he cares and that's what the wife in the story needs. Someone who will care and listen to her.

The story is also about connection – "She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose – even her neck!" – and communication: "But she and the blind man kept in touch", something the narrator finds it hard to do. But his epiphany at the hands of the blind man transcend talk – it is a physical and mystical moment – "It was like nothing in my life up to now", experienced with his eyes closed and with no words to truly describe it: "It's really something, ' I said."

Unlike Carver's other stories, however, "Cathedral" ends with hope; although there is no proof that the narrator will overcome his isolation, for the moment, he is in communion with himself and another human being. He is happy to have company at night and what is more, he experiences the pleasure of freedom, the pleasure of feeling part of the world outside of himself.

2.4 Tragedy

The characters confront tragedies in their lives. Tragedy consists also in forces outside of human control. In such characters, even time is a kind of tragic force. It passes without people understanding it and once it is gone it cannot be undone. They may try to turn it back but in vain and the result is that they are left desperate and hopeless. For instance, the couple in "Feathers," in "Chef's House," in "Preservation," in "Careful," in "Where I'm Calling From," and in "Fever." In these stories, the characters quite frequently become nostalgic and try to remember the time in which the relationship they had with one another was different.

The most typical example of tragedy is in "A Small, Good Thing." The tragedy of Scotty's death is devastating, but it ironically brings the couple together because they are the only ones who can perfectly understand each other's loneliness and desperation.

2.5 Inaction

Carver's characters know that they are unhappy, but are unable to take action to change this reality. On the other hand, they sometimes do not even consider the necessity of such a change.

In "Feathers," Jack and Fran are living a futile and meaningless life until Bud and Olla's situation changes them. Of course, the action they take only makes their unhappiness even more obvious.

"Preservation" is a story about inaction. The husband is completely unable to confront problems and this in the story is illustrated by the image of the frozen man. He is frozen in his unhappiness.

Myers in "The Compartment" is a character who has taken the decision to lead a life isolated from others and consequently take no action whatsoever. The irony in this story is that the central character has no intention of changing the situation. On the contrary, he accepts everything as completely normal.

Part of the pain in "A Small, Good Thing" is the lack of action anyone can take to help Scotty. This feeds into the theme of tragedy – no matter what parents feel, they cannot do anything to help their son. It is this kind of surrender that connects them with the baker.

The same happens in the short story "Vitamins". The characters feel unhappy however, they don't take any action. There is talk of leaving for Portland but still nothing happens. Those rare actions taken such as the date between the narrator and Donna illustrate how unwilling they are to improve their lives.

In "Careful," Lloyd wants to be happier but seems unable to control his alcoholism. Something similar happens in the short story "Where I'm Calling From" in which alcoholism can be perceived as a problem of inaction. The narrator is afraid of being unable to control his drinking. However, near the story's end it seems that he tries to take some actions when he asks for a kiss from Roxy and then calls her his girlfriend.

In "The Train," Miss Dent has taken action. She wants to take revenge, by holding a gun on the man who has treated her badly. But that action is followed by passive waiting. She can't do anything until the train arrives.

In "Fever," Carlyle wants to take some action and find a babysitter but cannot do so. What he does brings no results, and he even has to rely on Eileen, considered by him as an antagonist, to help him. His epiphany comes from finally accepting his helplessness when he confesses how he feels to Mrs. Webster.

In "The Bridle," Marge is unable to take action to improve her life. She almost confronts Harley at the end, but in vain.

In "Cathedral," the epiphany comes when the narrator, a man who chooses to live in front of the TV ignoring the rest of his life, finally takes action to create something for himself. Robert, who is interested in travel and learning new things, leads the narrator to take action towards being a part of the greater world and consequently leaving behind his loneliness.

2.6 Detachment

Carver's characters are detached from themselves. They feel distant from their own identities.

In "The Ducks," the theme of detachment is crystal clear. The story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator and from the beginning of the story the readers realize that Carver is using the landscape and the flight of the ducks (black explosion) to set the mood for the story. Another interesting thing about the opening passage of the story is that Carver is also using symbolism (and a foreshadowing device) to suggest to the reader the idea of a detachment. The main protagonist, an unnamed man is chopping (or splitting) wood. This is significant as it suggests a separation or detachment, Carver mirroring the splitting of the wood to the sense of detachment that the main protagonist feels when he reflects on his own life.

Carver uses symbolism in the opening passages of the story to suggest the idea of detachment (from self) and which also serves as another foreshadowing device. There is the blanket that has fallen from the clothes line. Again this is significant as it is not only separated from the other blankets on the clothes line but it is also detached from the clothes line.

In "Chef's House, " the characters (especially Wes) deceive themselves by pretending they don't have the problems. They behave as though a change in house can help them to start a new life, but they fail to do so when they understand that such a change would bring nothing as long as they have to face themselves.

In "The Compartment, " Myers is not certain if he wants to connect with his son. He has been living for a long time a lonely life and deep inside feels the longing to connect with a world that looks so far away from him. However, it seems that he is unable to bring such a change in his life perhaps because he has been living alone for such a long time that he is accustomed to that. He is at the point when he does not know exactly what he really wants.

In "A Small, Good Thing, " the characters seem to have no connection with the tragedy, as if it has not happened to them but to other people. It takes a long time before they confront the reality. The final scene is very simple. Not only do they feel helpless but they also accept their fate so they stop trying to be different from who they really are.

In "Vitamins, " Patti says "maybe I don't dream." This is true of anyone in the story. They seem to want different things but on the other hand they do nothing to achieve them. Time passes but nothing changes, and so does their depressing lives.

In "Cathedral, " the narrator hides behind meanness when what he really wants is to be connected to something. He cannot understand his real problems until Robert leads him to first look inside himself and then finally to see how can he live in a kind of communion with the world.

2.7 Alcoholism

Alcoholism is a prevalent theme in Carver's work. It is a theme directly related to the personal life of the writer who suffered due to his father's alcoholism and then his own. In his stories a considerable number of characters are current or recovering alcoholics. All of their problems and themes can be traced to their alcoholism, either as a cause, symptom or symbol of the problem.

2.8 Communication

Another major theme in Carver's works is the problem of communication. Carver depicted the desperate life of white- and blue-collar workers, salesmen, waitresses and their inability to express themselves. Things are not clearly expressed and the conflicts are almost never resolved. What the reader has to do is to understand the meaning of the story through implications. The loneliness, the lack of connection etc., relate to the inability to express oneself. There are times when narrators lack the vocabulary to express their longing, as in "Feathers, " "Where I'm Calling From, " or "Cathedral." In other stories, characters need connection but are not able to express their thought.

His short story "Cathedral" is the best illustration of the theme. A story that depicts the encounter between an initially close-minded narrator and a free-thinking blind man. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that both characters need each other in order to evolve. It has an optimistic ending, it features a man who transcends his limitations not through words but rather through a silent communion. In the same way Robert 'sees' greater life despite his blindness, the drawing of the cathedral leads the narrator to say more to himself about what he needs, even if he can't put it into words.

In addition, in almost all his short stories there are characters who can't speak to one another. Fran and Jack lack the playful language that Bud and Olla share in "Feathers." Lloyd is unable to tell Inez how he feels in "Careful." Marge lacks the strength to say aloud to Betty that she needs a friend in "The Bride." It seems that in the majority of the stories, we can find illustrations of limitations on communication.

2.9 Light vs. dark

The theme of light and dark is reflected in the sight and blindness imagery which pervades "Cathedral." The blind man is revealed not as the one who lives in the dark but, paradoxically, in light. He sees the infinite possibilities which the husband, with his sight, with his light, cannot see. Indeed, he teaches the husband to close his eyes, feel and see with his senses and, draw. It is, thus, that when she walks in towards the end of the story, she finds them both on the floor, drawing a cathedral. That cathedral is a symbol of the light which the two men find together and whose essence the wife represents.

Carver doesn't hide life's miseries; but, he also recognizes the little things that lead to hope. What do you really think about when you consider love? Love isn't perfect for certain; but, real people have the most profound capacities to accept each other's faults, recolonize weaknesses, and still forgive. Why is this? It's because deep down we know that none of us can

escape making mistakes, we too. In this text, Carver implies several attributes which may lead to success in love: recognize everyone makes mistakes, the person we love must one day accept our flaws, forgiveness means loving us anyway.

2.10 Materialism, Appearance and Morality

In Carver's short story *Are These Actual Miles* can be noticed the theme of materialism, appearance and morality. The story begins with Leo and his wife Toni. They have to go to bankruptcy court on Monday and their lawyer has advised them to get rid of the car before the courts take it off them. Leo thinks that it'll be better if Toni goes and sells the car, that she'll be able to get more money for it. What is interesting about the situation is that while Toni is getting dressed and ready to go out and sell the car she asks Leo how she looks. This is significant because it is a sign that appearance is important to Leo and Toni, how they appear to the outside world. Leo has made sure that the kids don't see the family fall apart. He has sent them to live with his mother for a while. Again the idea of appearance, to give the impression that everything is all right. The reader also learns how materialistic Toni and Leo are. They had expensive holidays, spent thousands on luxury items they couldn't afford because Toni believes that since she didn't have things as a child, her own children weren't going to do without.

Toni rings to tell Leo how much she has gotten for the car (\$625) but more importantly she also tells Leo what the salesman thinks of people who are bankrupt. He has told Toni that he'd prefer to be classified as a robber or a rapist rather than a bankrupt. It is through the salesman's opinion that Carver affords the reader the opportunity to see how important the American Dream is to people, money and possessions holding more weight than morals. The car is also a symbol for the American Dream, its sale is of benefit to someone else, the dream can continue for another person.

2.11 Masculinity as Homophobia

Michael S. Kimmel in his essay "Masculinity as Homophobia"¹ states that in Carver's work, men receive their sense of manhood from other men, which leads to homophobia because the prevalent emotion is fear. Based on Freudian model, the child desires his father and relies on him for his own masculinity. This reliance causes fear and exaggerated masculinity and consequently homophobia which plays a large role in three of Carver's short stories: "They're not your husband," "So Much Water so Close to Home" and "Cathedral".

The idea that men establish their masculine identity by the gaze of other men is most present in the story "They're not Your Husband." Indeed, the trigger of the narrative is pulled when the main male character, Earl, overhears two men comment on how "fat" his wife is. Earl is unemployed, and his wife has taken a job as a waitress. One night when Earl is half drunk he visits the diner his wife works at, seeking a meal on the house. While sitting at the counter he hears two men chatting about his wife. One man comments, "Look at the ass on that. I don't believe it . . . some jokers like their quim fat". Wounded in his masculinity, Earl at that point becomes determined to regain it by imposing a diet on his wife.

In "So Much Water So Close to Home" the narrator, Claire, tells the story of her husband, Stuart, and his friends finding a dead naked girl on their fishing trip. Instead of immediately calling the authorities and risking an abrupt end to their getaway they go ahead and drink and fish for a few days, deciding to cut their weekend short by only one day instead of missing out on the whole thing. What keeps the men from reporting the dead woman is their collective desire to prove their masculinity to each other. No one wants to be the sissy who decides to cut the trip short. Had any women been around with the men, the chances that anyone would put their hook in the water would have been presumably slimmer. Indeed, when Stuart realizes the extent of Claire's outrage he tells her, "I won't have you passing judgment on me. Not you". This statement suggests Stuart is used to having others pass judgment on him, namely other men, but will not allow his wife, or perhaps any woman, the same luxury; it could also suggest that his wife's (a woman's) judgment counts little, or less than that of the men

2.12 Epiphany

¹ Kimmel, Michael S. "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity." *Feminism and Masculinities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004: 182-99.

One last theme is the moment when characters have a sudden realization or epiphany. The epiphanic moments are present in Carver's works but the menace, as Gunter Leypoldt¹ calls it, is created because the characters are either unable to give voice to the epiphany or are incapable of comprehending it. Therefore, the question is whether they are able to learn from it. Conversely, another theme would be hope for personal growth, as the narrator in "Cathedral" seems to have an epiphany at the end when he realizes that he can communicate with the blind man and that doing so makes him feel very different and alive in many ways.

Conclusion

The study aimed to show that Carver has written stories categorised as part of Dirty realism which uses fictional techniques to shed light on the dirty unwritten (and often unspoken) truths that we individually and collectively censor from public dialog. Characters and settings are closely based on real people and places while the plots follow real-life sequences of events, which tend to be less linear and predictable than traditional forms of fiction. Language provides sufficient precision and depth to challenge our most learned elite but that is also accessible to the not so educated members of society. Grammar and style are strongly influenced by informal spoken language which is authentic and with minimal complexity.

With different arguments it was proved that Carver's fiction explores grief, loneliness, infidelity, insecurity and escape. He writes about people living a sad lifetime with problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, divorce. His style is characterized by a reduction of words and a focus on surface description. His characters are ordinary, unremarkable people, often with few resources and little money. They all live in the cities and the majority are workers, adulterers, alcoholics, women or ethnic minorities, people who experience estrangement, loneliness and disillusionment every single day of their lives. As a result, they have become tough, their dialogues are elliptical. The metropolitanism is gone to give way to the rural American and often inarticulate, unsophisticated protagonists. These working poor people have to sell their labour or even their bodies in order to survive and who might at any time lose everything, including the basic dignities that make human beings human. Carver's focus is on the simple ritual of everyday life by giving all his attention to the concrete and avoiding all possible abstractions. In his short stories he describes emotions, disappointments and relationships with simplicity and stoicism.

Carver's work is the narrative of the middle-class. It focuses on contemporary fashion, on our culture's obsession with looking good and being hip, on the trendiness of dance clubs and jeans and alcohol and drugs and sex and on our consumer society packed with brand names. Carver is the writer who believes that the reader can smell, see, and touch. Moreover, we find a narrative that believes in its own logic: in chronology, in plot, in psychology, in selfhood. This is the universe where content is privileged over form and where language is transparent.

Carver can be considered as the best representative of Dirty Realism, who explored all the themes typical of it and who had a huge influence on the next generation of writers. He was the one to bring into light the normal people, ordinary ones who inhabit his stories by clearly stating the reality of American people not the American dream that was promised to them. In his work we can find the humanistic writer that perfectly understood the "daily tragedies" of people and with a brilliant mastery depicted their lives not as they should have been but how they really were. If one enjoys reading about normal people in real life situations and not larger-than-life heroes then that one may find oneself in Carver's crude realism.

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¹ S. Koch, et al. 'Throwing Dirt on the Grave of Minimalism.' *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry and Prose* 14 (1989): pp. 42-61.

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