

Dark Humor and Masculinity Reconstruction in Carver's Stories

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Abstract

Although Carver has enjoyed increasing popularity both at home and abroad, humor and masculinity construction in his short stories seem both disproportionately ignored. This paper first focuses on the humor in four of Carver's short stories and then discusses the relationship between humor and masculinity construction. Two theories are employed to back up my argument: The incongruity theory of humor and Judith Butler's re-conception of gender as performatively constructed and masculinity as tenuous and fragile. It is true that Carver's short fiction is full of emotional turmoil and hopelessness, but such peculiar bleakness is often mitigated with subtle humor, subdivided into verbal play, situational humor, and humorous characterization. These narrative strategies find expression in "A Serious Talk," "One More Thing," "Preservation," and "Careful." Such an observation means the general criticism that things start looking up in *Cathedral*, Carver's collection of his later period, needs qualifying: the first two stories come from *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, Carver's mid-phase collection, although the last two are from *Cathedral*. The association between humor and masculinity construction in Carver's short fiction should no doubt open up a new critical space in Carver studies.

Key words: Carver's Short Stories; Humor; Masculinity Construction

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INTRODUCTION: CARVER AND HUMOR

Raymond Carver, dubbed "The American Chekhov" at the time of his premature death in 1988 at the age of fifty, is considered "the most important American short story writer of the twentieth century after Ernest Hemingway" (Miltner, 2014, p.1).

It is common knowledge that the study of Carver has a tremendous following in domestic literary criticism, reaching its apex with the publication of Carver's *Collected Stories* by the Library of America in the U.S. The international scholarship has also grown in the past decade or so:

The founding of the International Raymond Carver Society by Sandra Lee Kleppe and Robert Miltner in 2005, and its related journal, the *Raymond Carver Review*, in 2006, established an ongoing international approach to Carver studies which, according to Carver biographer Carol Sklenicka, "promotes critical study" and provide[s] a vibrant platform for discussion of Carver's work." (Miltner, 2014 p.2)

Recent publications by international scholars include: *Carver Across the Curriculum: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver* (Paul Benedict Grant & Katherine Ashley, Canadian scholars, 2011), *The Visual Poetics of Raymond Carver* (Ayala Amir, an Israeli scholar, 2010).

Why is Carver so internationally popular despite the dominant impression of bleakness created by his writing?

The answer lies in the fact that an unusual variation of dark humor appears in both Carver's poetry and short fiction, a very much ignored aspect in the profuse criticism directed towards Carver's literary landscape.

A few critics, however, have noticed humor in Carver. Kirk Nasset mentions in passing that "Carver's style—modulating in mood from darkly humorous to grim to positively eerie—also draws notably from Kafka" (pp.2-3). Tess Gallagher, Carver's second wife, poet and writer, comments:

In his last public reading in the Northwest, he read "Elephant" aloud in a small Seattle bookstore that was jammed with listeners, there was so much laughter he had to stop again and again, gazing up once in a while with a shy smile on his face, trying to contain his own enjoyment enough to get the story out. (Stull and Carroll, 1993, p.107)

David Carpenter, a Canadian writer, records his experience of listening to Carver reading "Whoever Was Using This Bed" in Canada on a stormy September night in 1986: "More than a hundred sodden people are howling with laughter. The characters grope through the night for words to put on their fears and despair, but throughout the story there is this laughter. The applause continues for a long time." (Stull and Carroll, 1993, p.174)

Carver himself once comments on the function of laughter: "Who doesn't feel the world brighten when they've had a few good from-the-belly laughs?" ("On Longer Stories," qtd. in Grant, p.156).

But of all the words that critics habitually employ to characterize Raymond Carver's writing, "humor" has always been absent; with few exceptions, far from provoking "a few good from-the-belly laughs," his stories are commonly described as being flat in tone, dark, dismal, and depressing. Paradoxically, all these criticisms are correct. Most of his narratives are flat in tone, because Carver follows the humor strategies of deadpan delivery elaborated in Mark Twain's "How to tell a story," that is, however funny the story may be, the narrator strings together a series of absurd situations wearing an impassive mask, pretending that he has no idea that anything funny is taking place. Carver's stories are largely dark, dismal, and depressing, a necessary context out of which dark humor can be created.

As a matter of fact, humor is a hallmark of Carver's personality. Here are piles of evidence from family and friends. Maryann, Carver's first wife, considers him "a very funny man" (Halpert, 1995, p.64). Richard Ford, a novelist and a close friend, agrees: "When Ray was around there was such a sense of mirth and good humor in the air" (Halpert, 1995, p.163). Dorothy Catlett, an acquaintance, admits that one of her most vivid memories of Carver is his "wonderful laugh" (Halpert, 1995, p.198). Tess Gallagher, Carver's second wife, confirms this in her introduction to *Carver Country*:

If I could add one element to Bob Adelman's portraits of Ray, it would be something impossible to show in photographs—his infectious laughter. In his years with me the house was full of this laughter, which came out of him as a stored-up gladness, a hilarity that ignited spontaneously while he talked on the phone to friends, or sat in his bathrobe reading aloud from a letter. (p.19)

To top it off, it is such a surprise that Carver, who had been credited for laying "the groundwork for a realist revival in the 1980s" (Stull and Carroll, 1993, p.13), had an evaluation for the humor in his work. Carver once complained about the apparent critical consensus that he has portrayed a very dark America in his writing with

the clarification that the tone of his stories is "grave... tempered with humor.... I don't feel I'm emphasizing the dark side of things" (Alton, 1990, p.159). In "David Sexton Talks," Carver said:

A story in Cathedral called "Careful," about a guy who has his ear plugged up, is on the face of it a grim and desperate situation, but I read the story aloud at Harvard University last month...and the people howled. They found it terribly funny in parts.... It's dark humor. (p.131)

All my stories are a little bit dark.... But there's humor in them, too, often. I think "Elephant" is funny. I read it aloud once, and it was hard to get through the story because of the laughter. ("Raymond Carver: Darkness," pp.245-246)

Although Carver's writing, particularly his short fiction, has continued to be popular among both US and international critics and scholars, only two pieces of criticism are exclusively directed to his humor, one being a paper, entitled "Laughter's Creature" (Grant, 2008), the other a book-length study, *Raymond Carver's Short Fiction in the History of Black Humor* (Zhou, 2006). Obviously, Carver's humor remains a much-overlooked element of his work.

This paper will analyze four of Carver's stories, to illustrate that humor exists extensively and plays an important role in masculinity construction. All the stories have some humor and one subject matter, the estrangement between man and wife. "One More Thing" and "A Serious Talk," both from *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (1981), will first be briefly explored, to prove that Carver, through subtle humor, starts conveying optimism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A somewhat extensive discussion will be carried out on the humor in "Careful" and "Preservation," both from *Cathedral* (1984), a universally acclaimed masterpiece and the most optimistic of all of Carver's short fiction collections. Finally, the relationship will be dealt with between humor and masculinity construction, thus opening up a critical potential for further Carver studies.

1. HUMOR IN "A SERIOUS TALK" AND "ONE MORE THING"

Carver can be seen as belonging to a tradition of writers who give expression to "American disappointment". According to Kirk Nessel,

Carver's figures take American disappointment to its barest extreme, haunted as they are by unfulfillable, intangible longings, paralyzed, lost, pushed well beyond the verge of articulate dismay.... [They] cannot speak their pain. They translate it instead into obsessive behavior, into desperate and abusive patterns, into drinking, smoking, and eating, into adultery, into voyeurism and, on occasion, violence." (pp.3-4)

Naturally, there exists a combination of similar, ridiculous scenes in "A Serious Talk" and "One More Thing." The ridiculous scenes are rooted in the male

protagonists' "obsessive behavior." In "A Serious Talk," the estranged husband, in moments of impulsive behavior, burns his wife's collection of Christmas logs, steals her home-baked pies, and saws through the telephone line with a carving knife when his wife is, in the bedroom, talking over the phone with a potential lover. In "One More Thing," the husband hurls a jar of pickles through a window and then accuses both his wife and teenage daughter of being crazy.

The humor in these two stories appears largely on two levels, which are verbal play and situational humor. The best-known theory of humor is the incongruity theory. The formal object of amusement is the incongruous: "What amuses us is some object of perception or thought that clashes with what we would have expected in a particular set of circumstances" (Morreall, 6). When expunging the incongruity theory, Oring says: "All forms of humor are rooted in appropriate incongruities" (Oring, p.5). As for the social functions of humor, Freud has given a convincing statement in "Humor":

Like wit and the comic, humor has in it a *liberating* element. But it has also something fine and elevating, which is lacking in the other two ways of deriving pleasure from intellectual activity. Obviously, what is fine about it is the triumph of narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer.... Humor is not resigned. It is rebellious. (Morreall, p.113)

The title, "A Serious Talk," contains a funny irony: there is no serious talk in the story. Most of the space is devoted to Burt's unhappy memory of the situations that cropped up during his visit on Christmas to Vera, his wife, their daughter and son. Vera has warned Burt, the jilted lover visitor, that he must leave before six o'clock because her friend and his children are coming over for Christmas. When sitting at the living room with his family, staring at the Christmas tree, "Burt **liked it** where he was. He **like it** in front of the fireplace, a glass in **his** hand, **his** house, **his** home" (emphasis added, *What*, p.106). With the repetition of "his" for three times, the narrator-husband succeeds in expressing his intense attachment to his family and his house at the expense of grammar. This instance of verbal play contains comic incongruity: however strong he feels about his home, it is, in fact, not "his house, his home." Borrowing a term from the Prague school of linguistics, Tony Tanner calls this kind of writing "foregrounding," language that invites inspection of its workings rather than pointing to its referents (Tanner, 1971, p.21). The result of such a linguistic violation is humorous; it not only compounds Burt's love for his family and everything related to it, but also privileges the potential that Burt possesses of defending his home by hook and crook.

To strengthen this picture of the protagonist's faith in his home, where things are falling apart, the narrative in the following paragraph exhibits an identical strategy of verbal play:

From time to time his daughter walked into the dining room with something for the table. Burt **watched her**. He **watched her** fold the linen napkins into the wine glasses. He **watched her** put a slender vase in the middle of the table. He **watched her** lower a flower into the vase, doing it ever so carefully. (Emphasis added, *What*, p.106)

As a result of the repeated sentence of "he watched her," a slow motion of intensive depiction is carried through. Burt's reluctance to tear himself away from his family, despite his wife's betrayals, is once again stressed. Humor reaches a high pitch later, when Vera fails to ignite the stove because the pilot light is out again. Burt plunges himself into a funny flight of fantasy while warning Vera: "Don't catch yourself on fire":

He considered her robe catching fire, him jumping up from the table, throwing her down onto the floor and rolling her over and over into the living room, where he would cover her with his body. Or should he run to the bedroom for a blanket? (*What*, p.108)

Right in the midst of marital strain, Burt has the cheek to resort to such a romantic moment in imagination! An instance of situational humor is created out of comic incongruity. The fanciful illusion of going to bed with his wife can serve at least two purposes: for one thing, it is a humorous moment of catharsis, lifting Burt out of the anxiety for "a serious talk" for the time being; for another, it is an emotional moment that inspires confidence in Burt. Such a moment helps Burt transcend the current trouble and move towards some sort of hope. Burt seems to be moving toward a moment of empathy with his wife when he, for the first time, betrays some signs of intelligence in figuring out what occupies his wife's mind. When his wife discovers that, to stop her from talking to a man on the phone, he has just sawed through the phone cord, she becomes desperate and threatens him with calling the police:

He picked up the ashtray. He held it by its edge. He posed with it like a man preparing to hurl the discus.
"Please," she said. "That's our ashtray." (*What*, 112)

The ultimate effect of Burt's gesture of "posing" to hurl the ashtray is to test Vera's attitude toward "a serious talk." The fact that Vera prevents him from hurling "our ashtray" opens up a potential hope in their estrangement, turning Burt into one of the few heroic characters in Carver's mid-phase stories that have the intelligence to assure a crucial opportunity that will lighten up their future.

The scene of L. D.'s playful, though revengeful, act of packing up to leave his wife in "One More Thing," bears resemblance, in its narrative function, to that of Burt's "posing" in "A Serious Talk." The two instances of situational humor indicate that these two stories employ some similar humor strategies. The final story in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, "One More Thing" aptly sums up the major themes of the collection: alcoholism, poor communication, and marital

estrangement. After declaring that he is "leaving this nuthouse," Burt, the protagonist, starts packing up for his departure from his home:

He made his way into the bedroom and took one of her suitcases from the closet. . . . She'd used to pack it full of sweater sets and carry it with her to college. He had gone to college too. He threw the suitcase onto the bed and began putting in his underwear, his trousers, his shirts, his sweaters. . . . He put everything he could into the suitcase, everything it could hold. He washed his face. He put the soap and towel in to the shaving bag. Then he put in the soap dish and the glass from over the sink and the fingernail clippers and her eyelash curlers. (*What*, p.158)

The whole process of packing-up occupies about one page, from L. D.'s entering the bedroom to the moment when "he went into the living room" (*Where*, p.158), seemingly ready to leave his family. It is a slow and lengthy process, given the fact that the whole story is only four pages and a quarter. The deliberate, specific listing of the items that go into the suitcase first and then the shaving bag is indicative of Burt's hesitation: he is not ready to leave "his house, his home."

The deliberate and slow process of packing-up is a source of situational humor. It is so funny—he is also taking his wife's eyelash-curlers—and incongruous with Burt's firm and impatient declaration of "leaving this nuthouse." This funny gesture gives an outlet to his desire for vengeance. More importantly, it betrays his reluctance to leave his home. But "[t]he wear and tear of having had to put up and bear up for so long" (Saltzman, 1988, p.120) is too much for his wife, and she misunderstands her husband's last minute attempt at making peace with them. Parting with his family as the last thing on his mind, he finally decides to bid his time. His wife's contempt, with their daughter as an ally in forming an impenetrable wall against him, however, thwarts his effort at softening the confrontation at the last minute.

The diction in "One More Thing," the repetitive use of words such as "crazy," "nuts," and "nuthouse," for instance, makes contribution to humor as well. L. D. calls his daughter crazy when she insists that everything, including cancer, starts in the brain. When the exasperated L. D. throws a jar of pickles through the kitchen window, his daughter accuses him of craziness. When Maxine, regarding their daughter's refusal to school as "another tragedy in a long line of low-rent tragedies" (*What*, p.156), suggests calling police to restrain the violent L. D., he calls them both "nuts" and their house "nuthouse." Things are dark indeed. But, comically, L. D. says repeatedly "I'm going" and its variation like "I'm leaving" for eight times in a space of less than one and a half page, before what follows:

He took a last look around the living room and then he moved the suitcase from one hand to the other and put the shaving bag under his arm. "I'll be in touch. Rae. Maxine, you're better off out of this nuthouse yourself. (*What*, p.122)

The emotional farewell is so unexpected and comically incongruous with his dramatic action of packing-up! This instance of humor points to something hopeful, a visionary future, rather than some final breakup. Douglas Unger oversimplifies the darkness in "A Serious Talk" and "One More Thing" by ignoring the liberating element of humor in them when he made the following comment:

In fact, he was writing the darkest stories he ever wrote, the stories in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*. He had reached such a depth of depression and also a stylistic minimalism beyond which I think it was impossible to go. I mean in stories such as "A Serious Talk" and "One More Thing." The very dark stories about the breakup of a marriage that are so stark and full of pessimism about the world. (Halpert, 1995, p.118)

Abundant with examples of verbal play and situational humor, "A Serious Talk" and "One More Thing" actually allow their protagonists and antagonists ample room for improvement even amid the circumstances where they are subjected to the grips of "a depth of depression."

It is true that the men in Carver's short stories always lack empathy with others. Their open-endings give the impression that the attempts at communication between people have fallen down. But from the endings of both "A Serious Talk" and "One More Thing," the protagonists become, instead, conscious of others' feelings and accept the hints of their wives. They may be far from successfully establishing empathy with family members, but there exists a glimpse of potential masculinity construction based on transformed social conventions. "Black humor protagonists seldom reconcile themselves to the hostile circumstances in their society; nor does black humor offer solutions to dilemma" (Zhou, 2006, p.3). Likewise, these protagonists of humor might not be able to live up to the traditional heroic images of fatherhood as the breadwinner, but they cling to the last vestige of "courageous cowardice" (Potts, II) typical of the antihero, thus giving rise to hope.

On the basis of Freud's definition for humor's social and emotional functions, humor's ability to temper past experience and offer refuge in the midst of current troubles achieves particular poignancy in both "A Serious Talk" and "One More Thing."

2. HUMOR IN "PRESERVATION"

Carver's stories cluster around the hearth, the living room, and the bedroom even. My analyses of the first two stories focus on verbal play and situational humor. What follows will stress humorous characterization in "Preservation" and "Careful," where characters convey comic incongruity between ideals and reality.

The protagonists and their wives suffer desperately and quietly: they are often inarticulate to such an extent that even communication between them proves hardly

possible. At the opening of “Preservation,” there is an irony that the husband loses employment on Valentine’s Day. Henceforth, he gets stuck to the sofa day and night. Here is the dark daily routine that Sandy and her husband go through:

But by the time she left for work, he’s made his place on the sofa and the TV was going. Most often it would still be going when she came in again that afternoon. But sometimes the TV would be off and he’d be sitting there holding his book. “How’s it going?” he’d say when she looked in on him. “Okay,” she’d say. “How’s it with you?” “Okay.” (Carver, 1984, p.37)

The nature of menace that these characters feel is mostly invisible, and, in some cases, unidentifiable. Their withdrawal from even those closest and most beloved to them is so complete that it leads nowhere except to spiritual immobility and emotional paralysis.

A joke appears in the middle of the story that portrays Sandy as funny in that there exists in her personality a gap between performance and ideal claims. Sandy confides her husband’s behavior to her girlfriend at work. Instead of being taken back by the story, the friend stuns the worried wife into disbelief with another example of human inertia.

Her friend told her about her uncle in Tennessee—when her uncle had turned forty, he got into his bed and wouldn’t get up anymore. And he cried a lot—he cried at least once a day. She told Sandy she guessed her uncle was afraid of getting old. She guessed maybe he was afraid of a heart attack or something. But the man was sixty-three now and still breathing, she said. When Sandy heard this, she was stunned.... Sandy’s husband was only thirty-one. Thirty-one and twenty-three is fifty-four. That’d put her in her fifties then, too. My God, the person couldn’t live the whole rest of his life in bed, or else on the sofa. (Carver, 1984, p.38)

“In a double system model, humor shifts its readers’ attention from one system into another system via ambiguity, an element congruous with both systems—their overlap point” (Davis, 1993, p.17). In this joke, humor shifts attention from one system (Sandy’s husband’s obsession with staying on the sofa day and night) to another system (her friend’s uncle’s obsession with staying in bed day and night) via an ambiguity, an element congruous with both system—their “overlap point”: their obsession with bed/sofa in this case. But the parallel does not guarantee that Sandy’s husband will ultimately step into the friend’s uncle’s shoes and stay on the sofa for twenty-three years to come. Sandy’s reaction, a direct fruit of an ambiguity, is humorous. Out of anxiety for her husband’s eccentric behavior, she negotiates with herself what the unpleasant future holds for her. Dark humor in this case is again “a device reflecting disbelief in the intelligent that controls, or fails to control, the ongoing conditions of life” (Hasley qtd. in Pratt, p.109). But this is true for Sandy, who assumes that she is an intelligent person; it does not fully explain her character. Assuming herself to be an intelligent person, Sandy fails in her logics to decode the weird behavior in her husband. Her

attempt to seek an intellectual explanation crumbles to dust because the fear resides emotionally.

In a second joke in “Preservation,” Sandy, who carries on with her game of intellectualism, becomes a comic butt. She attempts further to ease the pain by harboring the following thought:

If her husband has been wounded or was ill, or had been hurt in a car accident, that’d be different. She could understand that. If something like that was the case, she knew she could bear it. Then if he had to live on the sofa, and she had to bring him his food out there, maybe carry the spoon up to his mouth—there was even something like romance in that kind of thing. (p.38)

The humor arises from an incongruity, underscored with three “ifs,” between Sandy’s ideal claims and her performance. To put it more specifically, the incongruity lies between Sandy’s unsympathetic behavior towards her husband (even when the latter is perfectly well, and taking care of himself, except for his complete withdraw from society and family) and her romanticizing herself (in loving her sick and bed-ridden husband). This discrepancy not only helps turn Sandy into a comic figure, but also makes this moment exceptionally dark. The insecure outside world has inflicted greater damage upon Sandy’s husband’s psychology than any physical wounds or illness could have done; thus he needs more care and encouragement from his wife. But claiming to “still love him” (p.37), Sandy only looks on by wringing her hands. Worse, there is a gap between Sandy’s grasp of the facts and that of her husband. There is no sign that it will be filed through their efforts for communication. The humorist-narrator puts in extra efforts to reflect Sandy’s longing for a rescue of her spiritually depleted husband, putting him back to his feet again. But the hope remains remote. As a matter of fact, Sandy has no sound evaluation of herself, let alone her husband. In the briefly quoted message, she makes several attempts to assure others that she has efficient capacity to “understand” the imagined catastrophe and “bear” its consequence. Ironically, the harder she tries, the less conviction she seems to possess.

Sandy becomes the subject of the humorous characterization. Humor, as a coping mechanism, often springs from pain and loss. As Carver admits, his humor is decidedly “black.” In the case of Sandy’s jokes, according to Freud, they exist to moderate life’s hardships, help toughening her spirit against adversity, and offer her a means of emotional escape. Her husband is portrayed as a victim of unemployment, stuck, from beginning to end, in a life of inertia, even to the extent of linguistic reduction. Sandy’s husband has totally lost his momentum, when compared with fellow victims in “A Serious Talk” and “One More Thing.” The other two male protagonists, though from Carver’s mid-phase collection, have exercised greater assertion when “hurt with arrows of life.” They not only talk back to their families that have misunderstood them, but also strive to fight back, literally.

Comparably, Sandy's husband and Lloyd, protagonist of "Careful", one stuck in the sofa in the living room and the other in his physically restricted "place", insulated from pain like the well-preserved two-thousand-year-old mummy in the journal Sandy's husband reads everyday, have themselves become "living dead." They trade their dignity and integrity for an illusion of comfort and security, tottering on the brink of abdicating their humanity.

3. HUMOR IN "CAREFUL"

The humorous characterization in "Careful" is epitomized in some very funny behavior of Lloyd, the male protagonist. Soon after the opening of the story, there comes a tremendously amusing moment when Inez, Lloyd's wife, visits him in his place:

He sat down at one end of the sofa, and she sat down at the other end. But it was a small sofa, and they were still sitting close to each other... She glanced around the room and then fixed her eyes on him again. He knew that he hadn't shaved and that his hair stood up. But she was his wife, and she knew everything there was to know about him. (Carver, 1984, p.115)

A sofa—and a small one—underscores an estranged relationship. The tone seems dark enough, but tremendously offset by the playful appearance of so many pronouns and the funny repetition of "sat," "sofa," and "knew." The constant repetition of "she" and "he" foregrounds both the physical nearness of the couple and their emotional distance, heightening some invisible menace. Paradoxically, the spatial narrowness of the small sofa reinforces their psychological separateness. Tony Tanner calls this kind of writing "foregrounding," language that invites inspection of its workings rather than pointing to its referents (Tanner, 1971, p.21). Exploring the quotation in terms of foregrounding and privileging reveals how the text achieves a sense of humor based on its textual detachment: instead of directly warding off his wife's stare at his messy hair and unshaved face with language, the male protagonist wages a psychological war in a defensive attitude.

His behavior and his intention of telling his wife about his plan to reduce alcoholic drinks are full of comic incongruity. That is, there exists a discrepancy between reality and ideality: his plan/ideal is to hold a serious talk with his estranged wife; but in reality, his behavior is incongruous with his ideal, and it seems so funny. This is a very good example of humor, rooted in the incongruity theory.

Not long after the opening of the story, the protagonist takes great pains to delay facing alcoholism, only part of the submerged menace. The moment he hears his wife Inez's voice downstairs, he "picked up the open bottle of champagne from the drain-board and took it into the bathroom, where he put it behind the stool"(Carver,

1984, p.117). But he has the cheek to tell his wife that he is tapering off the champagne.

Humorous characterization in this case lies in the wide gap between Lloyd's idealistic claims and his actual performance. He glorifies himself out of "self-aggrandizement" (Davis, 1993, p.252) rather than ignorance of self. Davis argues that inauthentic presentations, either out of self-ignorance or self-aggrandizement, reflect pretense and affectation (p.252). Henry Fielding, who derives comedy primarily from inauthenticity, states that:

Affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity and hypocrisy. For as vanity puts us on affecting false characters, in order to purchase applause; so hypocrisy sets us on an endeavor to avoid censure, by concealing our vices under an appearance of their opposite virtues. (Qtd. in Davis, 1993, p.252)

Both the vain and the hypocrite, of course, pretend to be better than they are. But Fielding argues that we are more amused to discover hypocrisy than vanity, "for to discover anyone to be the exact reverse of what he affects, is more surprising, and consequently more ridiculous, than to find him a little deficient in the quality he desires the reputation of" (Qtd. in Davis, 1993, p.253). Pirandello (p.132) distinguishes the different approaches to unmasking taken by the process itself; the satirist is disdainful of the illusions unmasked; the humorist is compassionate with those who must live by illusions. The last stance is surprisingly what the humorist narrator has taken in "Careful," though compassion is both defined and threatened by the story being left inconclusive, with the protagonist dangling in insecurity as regards what the night, a symbol of an unstable future, holds for him.

The humor in "Careful" is further strengthened by one more comically incongruous trait in the male protagonist's personality:

One morning he woke up and promptly fell to eating crumb doughnuts and drinking champagne... Time was when he would have considered this a mildly crazy thing to do, something to tell friends about. Then, the more he thought about it, the more he could see it didn't matter much one way or the other. He's had doughnuts and champagne for breakfast. So what? (Carver, 1984, pp.112-113)

The punch line "So what?" transforms a perception of the protagonist's attitude toward his peculiar menu for breakfast. At the bottom of the humor lies the protagonist's inconsistency in this issue. Although there is no change in his attitude, of which he is unwilling to admit, toward "a breakfast with doughnuts and champagne," he tries to downplay his surprise at such a breakfast and create the impression that he ultimately discovers nothing "unusual" about it, which in fact has been all along a joke in his eyes. Humor rises from the manner in which he struggles between the views, consistently contradicting himself. The punch line that concludes his sophistry is a defensive: "So what?" For one thing, his past and present attitudes to such a breakfast constitute an incongruity in

the protagonist; for another, the defensive and defiant tone, which tries to downplay the funniness of having doughnuts and champagne for breakfast, is incongruent with his psychology which, as a matter of fact, still picks up such a breakfast as an event “noteworthy.” The joke, outlining the protagonist’s stubborn inconsistency in a specific issue, transforms the reader’s perception of the character; that is, however much defiant reassurance he makes (Trachtenberg, p.587), he remains his old self.

Obviously, Lloyd has difficulty understanding himself and evaluating his present dilemma. He is funny because he is the type in whom “the funniest forms of ineptitude, of course, are the most extreme, those creating the widest gap between the ideal claims and actual performance” (Davis, 1993, p.220).

In fact, in the closing paragraph as well as in the opening one, there persists an image of Lloyd’s physical stuntedness, derived from his living “on the top floor of a three-story house” whose “roof slanted down sharply” (Carver, 1984, p.111), and walking around there, “he had to duck his head” and “stoop to look from his windows” (Carver, 1984, p.111). This physical stuntedness symbolizes a stunted vision in Lloyd, as a consequence of the limiting windows. Windows as a metaphor for confining vision are nothing new. Everybody is tailored by experience. Lloyd is no exception. This accounts for the appearance of the windows both at the start and finish of the story. “Reinforcing the sense of Lloyd’s imprisonment is Carver’s typical use of confined physical space as an objective correlative of psychological and emotional constrictions” ((Bethea, 2009, p.142).

4. HUMOR AND MASCULINITY CONSTRUCTION

Even while acknowledging his preoccupation with “a long line of low-rent tragedies” (“One More Thing,” *What*, p.156), Carver stressed that he was “also interested in survival, what people can do to raise themselves up when they’ve been laid so low”(Body, “A Conversation,” 199). This stance is well supported with my aforesaid argument for humor and its liberating function in “A Serious Talk,” “One More Thing,” “Preservation,” and “Careful.” Still, no easy solution is in sight to their emotional depletion and economic paralysis.

Robert Scholes made such comment in his *The Fabulators* on characters of black humor, which is also applicable characters of humor: “[t]he black humorist is not concerned with what to do with life but with *how* to take it” (emphasis added, qtd. in Zhou, 2006, p.7). The open or circular endings in Carver’s stories achieve shock effect through “the open-endedness, or lack of resolution, of his stories” (Saltzman, 1988, p.13). Consequently, “there is the threat of violence without the violence itself to provide any kind of catharsis” (Meyer, 1995, p.24). Yet the

three levels of narrative humor that are scattered all over the four stories demonstrate the protagonists’ determination not to give in to the entrapments of life, this is the first step toward what to do with the menace they encounter in life, or, to borrow Scholes’s language, *how* to tackle it.

“Humor is rebellious.” As a weapon to disregard rules and regulations, humor is always related to power, autonomy, and aggression. The humorist in most societies adopts a position of superiority. In the second half of the 20th century, American scholars, such as Regina Barreca, Nancy Walker, and James Kincaid, have persuasively argued that the marginalized, that is women and minorities, have always included humor as one of the most important weapons in their arsenal to protect themselves from psychological damage and to subvert the power of those in authority. There is no exception with Carver’s humor, which is employed as a coping mechanism for the so-called “embattled masculinity.”

It is obvious that humor of this nature is related to masculinity construction.

Raymond Carver is most often discussed not in terms of sexual politics but in terms of the virtues or vices of his allegedly “minimalist” style of writing. However, “when we shift the focus from Carver’s style to his characterization, we notice, I would argue, that many of his heroes are concerned with dilemmas of masculine identity” (Bullock, 1994, p.343).

Masculinity as a concept has long been understudied because people tend to think of it as an obvious and constant concept, a “belief,” reports Kenneth Mackinnon, “that man cannot fundamentally change, that there is a fixed masculinity” (p.3). But scholars have begun to argue that masculinity is better understood as fluid, time-related and variable across cultures and eras as well as subject to change over the course of a person’s life, and within any given society at any one time. Just as Mackinnon further notes, “masculinity alters over time and amid changing circumstances. It cannot, by that understanding, be a monolith, but is protean—change shape and emphasis—and also plural” (p.11).

Since the publication of Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire* (1985), literature has become a site for the study of masculinity and for understanding the social and sexual bonds that inform the techniques of power and inequality. *Gender Trouble* (1990), the groundbreaking work by Judith Butler, signals that it is unlikely to possess a coherent gendered subject and its stable alignment with a sexed body. Butler argues, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p.25).

The provisional nature of gendered performance proffered the possibility of less oppressive and obligatory forms of masculinity. Butler’s work prompted a renewed

attention to the historical operations of masculinity and the dismantling of what Butler defined as the "illusion of continuity between gender, sexuality and desire" (Butler, 1990, p.140).

The popular modern American code of masculinity can date back to the Victorian masculine ideal of courage, physical prowess, emotional self-control and above all a manly ethos of not complaining. After World War One, the culturally regenerative space of modernism provided an opportunity for the critical reappraisal of prevailing models of masculinity in both Europe and the United States. Representations of masculinity sometimes carry with them "the traces of the very femininity associated with tradition and mass culture (Joyce's Bloom), or the enervation of the emasculated modern man (Eliot's Prufrock)... Prufrock is another model of modern masculinity, confounded by the impotence of his masculinity" (Lusty and Murphet, 2014, p.7). Masculinity studies have entered into a long period of cultural reflexivity and malleability. The masculinity studies of the past 30 years or so have ushered in greater numbers of interpretations of masculinity, which question the obsolete mode of masculinity that men should remain outside the familiar modernist themes of alienation, loss, and fragmentation (Lusty and Murphet, 2014, pp.5-12). Consequently, it is common knowledge that masculinity is an exceedingly elastic category.

In Carver's work, crises and catastrophes are not heroic moments valued for their potential to reveal an existential truth but accidental occurrences in daily events. Thus the characters that experience them, either transformed or deeply affected by them, are condemned, quietly, to both economic and emotional paralysis. All the male protagonists of the four stories under discussion have, to some extent, succumbed to the overpowering forces of life's absurdities, but the stories/texts themselves do not. Within the stories that contain various levels of humor, contradictions and irreconcilables are allowed, but they also submit to the glittering intellectual designs of the humorous narratives, including the joke techniques, which permit at least a temporary feeling of triumph over the chaos of the situations depicted. Humor in the stories allows Carver to engage the complexities of modern life, holding them in suspension and distancing them through laughter.

Although some of Carver's best stories are narrated from a female perspective, the majority of Carver's stories are narrated from a white, male perspective, broadly speaking, representations of masculinity in crisis are transformed in some later stories into attempts to construct alternative, positive versions of masculinity. For example, three out of the four male protagonists I have just analyzed demonstrate, in their personality, some traditional dimensions of femininity, including the capacity for communication, caregiving, imagination, and poetic expression. Carver's stories insist on confronting

the confusion and violence inside the modern home and assert the pleasure of humor with astonishing creative tension. "As Carver's stories sort through the various versions and meanings of masculinity in the 1970s and 1980s, they capture a fuller understanding of the intense gender conflict portrayed and experienced by American men during these decades (Hall, 2009, p.175).

CONCLUSION

In neorealism, Carver's stories of humor, as I have argued, shift the focus from the public scrutiny of senseless wars, inhuman bureaucracies, and irresponsible technologies typical of postmodern fiction to the private traumatization bought about by perceptions of family, marriage, and love in the urban contemporary American home. His stories portray characters who are the walking-dead, at risk, of complete helplessness and paralysis, but who, through humor, strain for mitigation, even control, of such bleakness: "Throughout Carver's writing, dark tones are paradoxically heightened and lightened with black humor, creating distance not only from the pain of entrapment through the recognition of it, but from the very irony that such distance normally suggests in black humor" (Zhou, 2006, pp.25-26).

The humor of such nature becomes a source of inspiration to the victimized male protagonists' masculinity construction. Adam Meyer divides Carver's style into three phases: an early stage of relative expansiveness, an "arch-minimalist" period of intense reduction, and a final period of widening (p.12). Halpert asserts in agreement: "The ending of a usual Carver story leaves you on the brink of an abyss, and you look down into it. In *Cathedral* it's more like you're looking up to the sky and the sun is coming out" (p.139). "Masculinity in some of Carver's later stories expands to include more traditionally feminine traits, particularly communication and caregiving" (Hall, 2009, p.186). On the basis of my current argument, Hall's conclusion deserves a slight qualification, that is, by dropping "later." Such a correction can also cure the first two quotations in this paragraph of their neat but inappropriate divisions of Carver's work. That is, some of Carver's short stories, be they of the mid-phase or the later period, backed up with humor, represent changing masculine ideals in a positive light. His stories portray a more hopeful, constructive version of masculinity.

In conclusion, humor helps masculinity in some of Carver's stories expand to include traditionally feminine traits, achieving certain degree of androgyny, thus a sense of warmth and optimism filters through into the bleak landscape of his fiction. Such a critical judgment serves to solidify Carver's position as a dominant mainstream writer of the 1980s, when "representations of wounded masculinity in Reagan's relentlessly optimistic America quickly became out of place" (Hall, 2009, p.181).

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