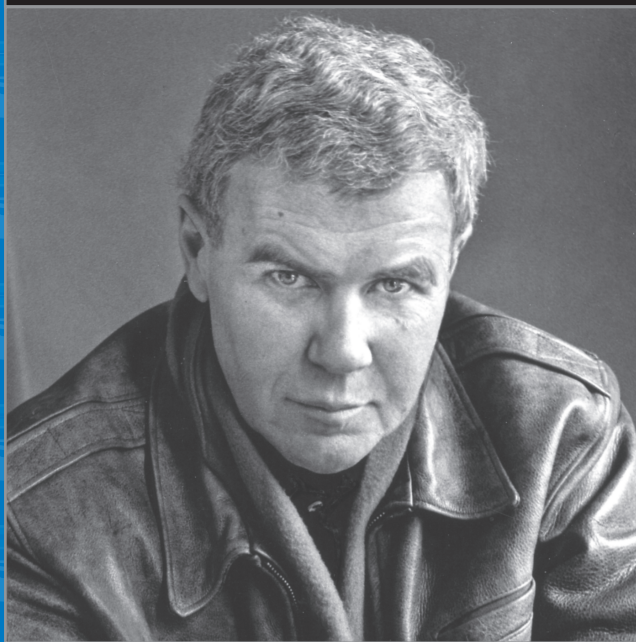


Raymond Carver in the Classroom

“A Small, Good Thing”

The NCTE High School Literature Series



Susanne Rubenstein

Contents



Acknowledgments ix

Introduction xi

1. Where Life and Art Intersect 1

2. Writing from Models 17

Interlude: Outside Looking In 36

3. Revision: A Not-So-Small, Good Thing 39

Interlude: Sustenance 60

4. Love, Faith, and Mystery 64

5. Two Voices, Two Views 77

Interlude: It Was Tess 93

6. Taking a Critical Stance 96

1

Where Life and Art Intersect



I was in Spain the summer Raymond Carver died, August 1988. I remember hearing a snippet of conversation in a café in the city of Seville. My ear caught the English traveling out from behind a newspaper at the next table: “Raymond Carver . . . died . . . lung cancer.” I felt a quick pang of sorrow. A writer whose work I had come to love was gone. Now, somehow, in the years since Carver’s death, my feeling of loss grows greater. At age fifty, Carver was at his prime as a writer. His fiction was becoming more expansive, and his poetry was flowing from him in a way it never had before. Ironically, only a very short time before the diagnosis was made of the cancer that would kill him, Carver spoke of the joy he had found recently in his writing: “I’ve never had a period in my life that remotely resembles that time. I mean, I felt like it would have been all right, you know, simply to have died after those sixty-five days. I felt on *fire*” (Schumacher 218).

Raymond Carver has been called the father of minimalism, a pioneer of “dirty realism,” and the voice of “blue-collar despair” (Weber 84). His writing is taut and tense and on-the-surface simple, and yet his short, stripped-down stories and poems say so much more than they seem to at first glance. He is a writer who changed the style of American fiction and who, in the 1970s, had an influence on a generation of writers much like that of Hemingway in the 1920s. Because of his absolute honesty, Carver

This is a concept we need to communicate when we ask students to write about what they know. Blame it on a lack of reading at an early age or a typical childhood spent more on video games and television than in imaginary play, but whatever the reason, students today seem less able to invent, to use their minds in a creative fashion, than students twenty years ago. When I ask my students to write stories, too many of their pieces are such strictly factual memoirs that they lack the spark that makes a story sing. Often the “original” plot lines mimic those of the action adventures or soap operas adolescents watch on the TV or movie screen. Yet as we study Carver’s life, students begin to see that while Carver’s art does draw closely on his life, it’s not bound by it, and it gains intensity through the invented material. My students come to recognize that Carver is a man who knows from living, breathing experience of what he writes, but he has the creative vision to give his life stories a new life, and, in doing so, he gives them extraordinary power.

Writers can't write strict autobiography—it would be the dulllest book in the world. But you pull something from here, and you pull something from over here, well it's like a snowball coming down a hill, it gathers up everything that's in its way—things we've heard, things we've witnessed, things we've experienced. And you stick bits and pieces here and then make some kind of coherent whole out of it. (Carver qtd. in Sexton 132)

Although Carver contends that “[n]one of my stories really *happened*, of course” (Simpson and Buzbee 40), what gives his fiction such heart is that each and every story could have happened, and in just the way he tells it. Carver captures the voice and view of the lower class. His characters have been described as “ordinary people rescued from the bin of anonymity” (Caldwell

and Ella Beatrice Casey. In 1941 he and his family moved to Yakima, Washington, where his father worked in a sawmill. Much has been written about Carver's difficult childhood, one that was affected by poverty and his father's alcoholism. Yet Carver himself speaks of his childhood as "fairly conventional in many respects" (McCaffery and Gregory 80) and talks of his father's storytelling, especially about hunting and fishing, as a positive influence, one that helped to turn Carver into what he calls

[a] dreamy kid. I wanted to be a writer and I mostly followed my nose as far as reading was concerned. I'd go to the library and check out books on the Spanish conquistadors, or historical novels, whatever struck my fancy. . . . Mainly I just wanted to hunt and fish and ride around in cars with other guys. Date girls. . . . But I did want to write, which might have been the only thing that set me apart from my friends. (80)

My students love this stuff, the image of a writer as a kid who can love “[h]unting late into that golden afternoon / for grouse. Following deer paths, / pushing through undergrowth” (“Wenas Ridge” 75) and writing equally. “Wenas Ridge,” the story of “[t]hree of us that fall. Young hoodlums—” (75), is one of my favorite poems to read with students, and it can be used to inspire them to write about an actual place where their own lives took a turn. In prose or poetry, they try to capture the physical landscape as well as the significant moment. This is what Greg does in his piece about a midnight foray onto a golf course:

The dark carpet of green rolled out in front of us. The sky was clear, lit by moon and stars. The warm air of the summer night sat on my shoulder, and the taste of the moist layer of silky dew on the fresh cut grass sat on my tongue as I inhaled deeply. The night sky, the grass, the moon, and the trees that swayed

in the wind all gave me a feeling of nature's freedom. A burst of emotion and tension shot out of me.

—Greg Jonaitis

In Carver's poem, the appearance of a snake leads him to a metaphor, one that reflects another segment of Carver's life: "I married the girl I loved, yet poisoned her life. / Lies began to coil in my heart and call it home" ("Wenas Ridge" 76). Though, with Carver's admonition about autobiography versus fiction in mind, I caution students not to take his words as the precise truth of his life, the connection here is more than coincidental.

At nineteen Carver married his sixteen-year-old girlfriend Maryann Burk. Within two years, the couple had two children, Christine and Vance. This was a difficult period for Carver and his wife. Although Carver dreamed of being a writer, the responsibilities of fatherhood demanded that he take a series of low-level and low-paying jobs instead, working as a custodian, a delivery boy, a service station attendant, and a mill worker (McInerney 24). A move to Paradise, California, in 1958, however, brought a stroke of good luck to Carver when he enrolled in a creative writing course taught by John Gardner at Chico State College. Despite the fact that he and his wife were, as Carver termed it, “stone broke” (“John Gardner” 107), Carver recognized the importance of education: “Understand that nobody in my family had ever gone to college or for that matter had got beyond the mandatory eighth grade in high school. I didn’t *know anything*, but I knew I didn’t know anything” (107). When we read these lines, I can almost see the proverbial light go on in some of my students’ heads. Carver’s essay reminds them that anything is possible, that they can look beyond the life that seems laid out for them, and that with hard work, hope, and some luck, anything is possible.

The Writing Life

For Carver, luck was this chance connection with John Gardner. Gardner was then an unpublished writer, but it was he who introduced Carver to a literary world and a literary process that would influence Carver for the rest of his life. Gardner demanded that his small band of students read Hemingway, Faulkner, Porter, and Chekhov, the last becoming one of Carver's primary influences. He made them familiar with the "little literary magazines," giving Carver his first introduction to a world of "living authors" ("John Gardner" 111). And he taught them the value of reader response and revision. Carver writes of how closely Gardner read his students' work: "We'd discuss commas in my story as if nothing else in the world mattered more at that moment—and, indeed, it did not" (112). Gardner was never hesitant to point out problems and suggest revisions, but "[h]e was always looking to find something to praise" (112), and Carver adds, "Seeing these comments, my heart would lift" (112). These are things I tell my students when they work in response groups—and things I remind myself when even one more paper to grade seems too much!

Despite Gardner's inspiration and the passion Carver had for writing, the 1960s were stressful years as Carver, only in his twenties, tried to be husband, father, student, worker, and writer. In 1960 he moved his young family to Eureka, California, in search of work. He transferred to Humboldt State College and within three years earned his BA. He was beginning to publish in small literary magazines but had yet to find the voice that would mark him. In the fall of 1963, with the aid of a small fellowship, he was given the opportunity to study at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he experimented with various styles and voices. Throughout the midsixties, he continued to work blue-collar jobs, and he continued to write.

the pressures of an artist's life, and a genetic inheritance combined to make Carver easy prey to alcohol. In one of his most moving poems, "Photograph of My Father in His Twenty-Second Year," he writes, "Father, I love you, / yet how can I say thank you, I who can't hold my liquor either, / and don't even know the places to fish?" ("Photograph of My Father" 7).

This Carver poem is often used as a model when teachers ask students to write from photographs, and any student who hasn't had that experience would benefit from such an assignment. In addition, *To Write and Keep Kind* (Walkinshaw), an excellent 1992 documentary of Carver's life, includes moving material on Carver's relationship with his father that serves as a backdrop for this poem.

Carver takes this voice and this family problem further in another poem, “To My Daughter,” reflecting on the sad legacy carried in the Carver family by alcohol. The poem is brutally frank and wrenching as the poet begs his daughter to stop her drinking, in hopes that she can escape the physical and emotional devastation he knows it brings. It ends with the lines “Daughter, you can’t drink. / It will kill you. Like it did your mother, and me / Like it did” (71). These are lines that stop many of my students cold, and they hear, in the desperate voice of the poet-father, echoes of somber advice they have been given—or perhaps that they themselves have given to others. I call this a “LISTEN To Me” poem, and I ask them to write one of their own, a poem in which the poet speaks to a particular reader as indicated by the title “To _____.” Though students often choose to use their own voice as that of the speaker and to be the giver of advice, it’s always interesting to me (and, I suspect, enlightening to them) to read the poems of students who try to capture the voice—and viewpoint—of someone in their own lives, a parent, a teacher, even an older

in 1976—Carver's life was in turmoil and alcohol was at its roots. The drinking was interfering with his teaching and hindering his writing. He often lived apart from his family, and when he and Maryann were together, they fought fiercely. Most significant, alcohol was seriously damaging Carver's health. He was hospitalized repeatedly, and the doctors spoke of "wet brain" and life-threatening liver damage.

Then in 1977, with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, Carver stopped drinking: “I had my last drink on June 2, 1977. I’m more proud of that than of any other accomplishment in my life” (Tromp 77).

But sobriety did not bring immediate happiness or career success. For Carver it was a continued struggle to ameliorate the stormy relationships he had with his wife and children and to find his voice and his way as a writer without the support of alcohol. That effort was aided by an introduction that same year to the poet and fiction writer Tess Gallagher, the woman who would become a partner in all aspects of his life. In Carver's words, "And then there's Tess. My life changed dramatically the day I met her" (Kellerman 40).

The Good Years

Gallagher is considered to be one of the most important influences on Raymond Carver, in terms of both his private and his public life. By July 1978, Carver's turbulent marriage to Maryann had ended (the divorce was made legal in 1982), and Carver began to pursue a relationship with Gallagher. The two began living together in 1979, their varied residences from Texas to Washington to Arizona to New York determined by the teaching positions each held. For the next nine years, the remaining years of Carver's

Whatever the level of discord between Carver and Lish, it definitely did exist, as evidenced by a fervent letter Carver wrote to Lish as he completed the manuscript of *Cathedral* in 1982. In the letter, Carver pleads to maintain control of his own words: "I can't undergo [that] kind of surgical amputation and transplantation. . . . Please help me with this book as a good editor, the best . . . not as my ghost" (Max 40).

Cathedral, named for its most well-known story and one of Carver's best, was published in 1983 as Carver wanted it, for the most part. The collection received rave reviews and earned Carver nominations for a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1983 and a Pulitzer Prize in 1984. *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* was also published in 1983, and in that same year Carver was awarded a Mildred and Harold Strauss Livings Award, a five-year fellowship from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters that allowed him to give up teaching. Now virtually free from financial worries, Carver instead faced the pressures of fame and so retreated to Sky House, Gallagher's home in Port Angeles, Washington, where he could write relatively undisturbed.

At this point, Carver turned to poetry with a new zeal. Although poetry, for a number of years, had taken a backseat to his fiction, in the mideighties Carver found new inspiration. He was very productive, publishing poems in *Poetry* magazine and in his own collections *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* (1985) and *Ultramarine* (1986). The publication of his poetry showed readers another side of Carver, a side just as honest as that evidenced in his fiction but somehow more intimate and vulnerable. Although he's generally known as a fiction writer, for Carver poetry had always been "very close to my heart" (Applefield 211), so close in fact that in June 1987 he said, "So I suppose on

Despite the clearly ominous course the disease was taking, Carver was buoyed by the May publication of *Where I'm Calling From* and by his induction into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. And on June 17, aware that time was running out, he and Gallagher married in Reno. On the morning of August 2, 1988, Carver died at home in Port Angeles, Washington.

Raymond Carver's life was one of extremes. The early years were grim, bleak, and difficult as he battled poverty, alcohol, and relationships gone wrong: "Life / was a stone, grinding and sharpening" ("The Autopsy Room" 150). His last years were good ones, bright with career success and personal happiness: "Alive, sober, working, loving and / being loved by a good woman" ("Gravy" 118). I know there are those who might argue that the hard facts of Carver's life are not the sort of stuff adolescents ought to grapple with. My students and I would disagree. My students seem to draw strength from Carver. Somehow his life embodies for them something of the American Dream. He reminds them that you don't have to start with anything but a dream, a passion, something that sets you on fire. Add to that persistence and drive and heart—and there is hope. When in a poem he tells them what you need for painting, they understand that this is exactly what you need for living too: "Indifference to everything except your canvas. / The ability to work like a locomotive. / An iron will ("What You Need for Painting" 142).

Raymond Carver found through his passion for writing the sort of success that allowed him to face even an early death with equanimity and something akin to joy. We hear this in his poem “Gravy”: “‘Don’t weep for me,’ / he said to his friends. ‘I’m a lucky man / I’ve had ten years longer than I or anyone / expected. Pure gravy’” (“Gravy” 118). Each year as we read these last lines, there

"Rubenstein's book does just what a book like this should do: gets readers excited about reading Carver and teachers excited about teaching him."

—John Gaughan, author of *Reinventing English: Teaching in the Contact Zone*

Featuring biographical information, detailed discussion of specific short stories and poems, critical analysis, and innovative activities for teaching literature and writing, *Raymond Carver in the Classroom: "A Small, Good Thing"* takes you into the world and work of Raymond Carver, the "father of minimalism."

Carver's writing presents an honest and moving portrayal of modern American life, with a focus on a blue-collar culture. With his straightforward, stripped-down style, Carver reaches readers of all levels, and his writing inspires thoughtful reflection on what it means to be a human being in contemporary times.

This fourth volume in the NCTE High School Literature Series includes an array of activities and assignments that promote powerful student writing, allowing you to

- Encourage visual learners by pairing Carver's poetry and fiction with the study of the works of artists such as Edward Hopper and Maya Lin
- Help students discover a unique approach to revision by studying Carver's own writing process
- Demystify poetry by having students read Carver's and write their own, including catalog poems and "LISTEN to Me" poems modeled after Carver's
- Explore point of view by examining what happens when Carver and his wife, poet and fiction writer Tess Gallagher, tell the same tale from two very different viewpoints
- Design Fact to Fiction projects that incorporate both memoir and fiction writing and that allow students to collaborate within and between classrooms
- Develop students' critical thinking skills by having them write reviews of Carver's work
- Spur classroom discussion with critical commentary and freewriting

Whether you're new to the work of Raymond Carver or are looking for some fresh ideas for teaching his works, you'll find this concise, practical resource guide a welcome addition to your professional library.

National Council of Teachers of English

1111 W. Kenyon Road
Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096
800-369-6283 or 217-328-3870
www.ncte.org

ISSN 1525-5786

ISBN 0-8141-3831-4



9 780814 138311

90000

