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Neorealism and its Domestic Burdens in Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" and Ann Beattie's "The Lawn Party"

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Abstract: ***Minimalism, as a literary movement in the 1970s United States, attracted considerable attention due to its use of sparse descriptive prose and the collective foregrounding of language and reflexivity. This seemingly new fiction is addressed in this paper by scoping a short story production from doyens of this genre, namely Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie. This paper will focus on the ingrained commentary on the inner lives of characters as they come to terms with a new socio-economic way of being, and how their daily flaws and frailties contribute to a new narrative structure and a constant awareness of self. Carver's meditation on city life and the layers of that old emotion of love is as relevant today as its influence on the writing of its time. Beattie's fractured telling of the realities and little pleasures of a disconnected family speaks to the tonal and multimodal representation of craft, language, and the use of irony. Together, these two tales may be said to have built up a deceptive profundity which turns out to be a swift yet sanguine meditation on the mundanities and intimacies of a newly awakened life and audience. Kim Herzinger's arguments about the relative self-reflections and highly conscious use of prose in this new fiction provide the critical background needed to situate these texts, enmeshed with the contrastive narrative strictures discussed by Lee Konstantinou vis-à-vis the postmodern problem. James Nagel's records of the changes in American short fiction post-Civil War and its subsequent history of moving from realism to something by a reified minimalism are also drawn upon to show how Carver and Beattie serve as examples of journaling the minutiae of sensible lives in an often-insensible generational epoch.***

Keywords: ***Minimalist, New Fiction, Minutiae, Sentimentality, Mundanity.***

I. INTRODUCTION

The new fiction that emerged and gained prominence in magazines with a wide readership, such as The New Yorker and Mississippi Review, captured the imagination of its reading audience, unlike much that had preceded this new style of writing. There was a perceptible shift in the style employed while crafting this new form of fiction. This quality had learnt from the lessons of realism and the art of the representation of experience, to something much more minute, one might even say more focused, in the weft of its Storylines.

As the critic James Nagel points out, much of the existing literature, which took the form of Realism or Naturalism, drew on the systems of value and the changing significance brought about by "the regional differences of the expanding United States" (1997) [1], which made itself most known in the exploration of empirical sensibilities and the essence of spiritual and physical nature, post the period of the American Civil War. If the Romantic fiction concerned itself with "grand conceptions, reaching for universals, … to explore the generic state of human existence," (Nagel 1997) [1], then Transcendentalism (as found in the works of Emerson and Thoreau) depended on the notion of the inherently spiritual in nature and its relationship with the human. The move from a kind of "spiritual Romanticism" (Nagel 1997) [1], to one that merged with Realism – the quest to depict experience as closely as possible, resulting in "passages of detailed description and plain conversation" (Nagel 1997) [1], resulted in a vast plethora of stories that formed the canon of many a literary magazine. It is the move from this clutch of stories that delineated a changing socio-economic moment in America to one that zeroed in on something reflexive or experimental, marking the shift from realist writing to the new realism or Neorealism of later authors, particularly from the seventies and eighties. This paper will explore two short stories, one each by Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie, that contrast and highlight the similarities and differences in their style and themes, while attempting to situate them within the broader context of minimalist writing or the new fiction of the post-postmodern era.

II. FRAMING AND DISCUSSION

The new fiction, a term introduced by critic Kim Herzinger, forms the basis of a discussion where the everyday mundanities of life come to the fore like never before. It is marked by a tonal shift in the emphasis that minimalist stories place on detailing, as well as aspects of self-reflexivity, which can be disruptive yet newly experimental (Herzinger 1985) [2]. Writers as diverse as Carver, Beattie, Mary Robison, Joan Didion, Richard Ford, etc. were certain of the group that came to define this new form of minimalist fiction, "characterised by equanimity of surface, ordinary subjects, … deadpan narratives." (Herzinger 1985) [2]. There were (and are) styles of characterisation and the foregrounding of details which link these authors, while separating them from the postmodern writings of earlier decades. The very tensions which are dealt with in these stories seem somehow more real and tangible, as can be seen in the exploration of anxieties in both Carver's "What We Talk About" and Beattie's "The

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Lawn Party." The condition of the minimalist storyteller, post the Vietnam War, was akin to adopting an attitude dealing with trauma by not explicitly speaking about it (Barth 1986) [3]. In both the stories discussed in this paper, we will see how anxieties borne within a domestic setting come to the fore and how the protagonists surrender themselves to the inevitable introspection that such discourses reveal.

A. Love and Its Discontents in "What We Talk About"

As Herzinger notes, the short story writer and poet Raymond Carver, in a *Paris Review* interview, expressed his dissatisfaction at being labelled a minimalist writer (1985) [2]. He thought the term too limiting in gauging the scope of his vision. A contemporary of Carver, Richard Ford, himself wrote that the term is not properly indicative of the new body of work it wanted to characterise, while also noting that it was "Carver's *fine stories* [that] summoned up that term." (Herzinger 1985, emphasis mine) [2]. "What We Talk About," the story that gives its name to the collection, was first published in 1981 and exemplifies the minutiae of daily living and its concomitant anxieties. At the heart of the tale is a group of four friends reacquainting themselves with the concept of love and its meaning in the busy, hurried lives of individuals. The style employed by Carver in his narration is easily accessible to both the "once-a-year reader" (Herzinger 1985) [2] and the seasoned discerner of short fiction. If irony is a quality which minimalist writing distanced itself from (Herzinger 1985) [2], then the same may be detected in great measure in the plain-speaking of Mel, Terri, Nick, and Laura.

The scene takes place in the kitchen of Mel McGinnis, a cardiologist by profession and the scene-stealing protagonist in disguise. It is Mel's narration of events, centring on love, which gets the four started on a long, languid conversation about the constituents of longing and affection. The setting is quite drab in the sense that it is very ordinary: a kitchen table with a glass of gin and ice, the sun pouring in through the windows, and a topic that touches on both personal and professional aspects. It is interesting to note that all four people involved were married for the second time, a link which helps them contribute to the kitchen chat. Mel and Terri debate the ethics of love, almost vying for the reader's support in the arguments they present for and against. It is made known that Terri's former spouse and lover was an abusive man, yet according to her, it was a deranged form of love that this abuser bore for Terri. The language is easy-going in the sense that the reader never loses track of what is said due to the sophistication or complexity of the style. It is evident from the first that Mel bears a load of resentment against Terri's former spouse, and he point-blank refuses to accept that physical and verbal abuse of the kind which was dealt out to Terri could ever harbour a shred of love. The discerning reader of Carver's fiction will note that Mel introduced himself by mentioning his years spent studying in a seminary, and it is evident that the experience of his past very much shapes his present views. For Mel, as the text defines, "real love was nothing less than spiritual love." (Carver 1981) [4]. Under such absolute terms, it is no wonder that Mel is positively belligerent about Terri's defence of her former lover's actions under the guise of misdirected love.

If, as critics like Herzinger and John Barth have postulated, minimalism meant saying as much with as little as possible, then doing it directly and without any hedge of unnecessary ornamentations is key to the fervent debate on the question of love in Carver's short story. The audience, or the reader, is never at a loss to grasp the text's core intentions. It is a regular weekend conversation between fast friends, bordering on experiences shared among them, with scant internal conflicts (the tonal discords between Mel and Terri, as opposed to the backseat harmony of Laura and Nick), which do not necessarily require a solution. The attractiveness of the story lies in the way it proceeds to unpack the meaning the concept of love holds in the lives of grown, world-weary adults. One might almost be pardoned for mistaking the language of the story as rather drab, given its many repetitions and descriptions of personal quirks. Mel is insistently repetitive while trying to get Nick and Laura on his side in the matter of defending abuse masquerading as love. Carver introduces a comic aspect to the storytelling when he describes the death of the abuser. As a result of ingesting rat poison (to commit suicide), Terri's ex ends up with "gums [that] pulled away from his teeth" (Carver 1981) [4], presenting a caricature in the process. It is subsequently revealed that Ed (the ex) tried to take his life a second time and did so successfully, although he did botch up the process somewhat. Terri's insistence on sitting through till the end with her ex, disregarding the objections of her present husband, Mel, can be traced to a feeling of pity for her former partner. While Terri managed to escape the cycle of physical beatings and injuries to a better life, her ex-spouse had to succumb to the faults of his constitution. The burden of this death seems to hang like a shroud over this otherwise humdrum palaver, and a little detection paves the way for uncovering Mel's resentments.

While narrating the portion about how Ed blew his head off with a pistol, Mel reveals that they were under threat from him, so much so that he even made a will addressed to his brother so that everyone would know "who to look for if something happened to him." (Carver 1981) [4]. The repeated harassment from Terri's ex led Mel to his conclusion that such disruptive and harmful behaviour could never pass for love – "He was dangerous … if you call that love, you can have it." (Carver 1981) [4]. The discussion thus far seems to settle on the point of disowning the aforesaid abuser's pretensions at love. Still, the direction in which Carver's text prevails enjoins the reader to ask the question of love – what could it indeed be, and did any of the participants know of it? There is a connection and relationship between Laura and Nick in response to the microaggressions of Terri and Mel. The first-person narrator (Nick) and his spouse, Laura, claim to not only be in love, but also to "like each other and enjoy one another's company. She is easy to be with. (Carver 1981) [4]. Their communication is never under any doubt, and this couple seems to be ideally in sync, as emphasised by Laura when she says, "Well, Nick and I know what love is." (Carver 1981) [4]. The sentimentality attached to the notion and the close friendship each shares with the other is palpable in the way the McGinnis couple insists on raising a toast to 'true love.' The eye-level communication, which minimalist stories tend to render (Herzinger 1985) [2], is visible to the reader in this section, where the instinct of the older couple (in

terms of years married) is to weigh the time horizon of the newlywed couple's togetherness. This is a tendency which is simple yet straightforward and found in countless human natures, if put in a similar surrounding. The communication between the participants is underscored here with a second, and ultimate tale-within-a-tale, one that finally unearths the meaning of the title.

Minimalists live in and create their worlds (Herzinger 1985) [2], and Mel does something similar when he expounds his disbelief that none of them may know what they are talking about when discussing love. It could be memory, or companionship, or clinging to a lost love, because at the end of the day, they are all just talking. The disbelief, however, stems from an incident witnessed at his workplace (the hospital), where an elderly couple who had been thoroughly smashed up in a car accident (and whom Mel had helped operate on) still found it in themselves to care for their other half, over and above any considerations of personal well-being or peril. Here it would be cogent to remember again the distinction Kim Herzinger makes for the art of the minimalist, new-realist type of fiction – minimalists "refuse to present themselves as sociologists, psychologists, or moralists." (1985) [2]. Mel, despite being a cardiologist and well-educated for his profession, seems unable to find the words to describe his disbelief at the behaviour of the old couple. The elemental change here, from trying to establish a base for sound, pure, true love, to being unable to recognise such once-in-a-lifetime soul-searching love, is brought about by no unnecessary embellishments in language by Carver. He simply makes his protagonist state as he pleases – "Can you imagine? I am telling you; the man's heart was breaking because he could not turn his goddamn head and *see* his goddamn wife." (Carver 1981) [4]. The simplicity and brevity of the prose, along with the unpretentious structure of the language, lend timeless importance to Carver's tale. While it may not have clearly distinguished the actual value or purpose of love, it certainly belabours the point that love evades any easy definition or trappings. The closing sequence, where the gin bottle is empty and a sense of languid ease envelops all four friends, to the point where they forget they are meant to go out to eat, drives home the point about the vagaries of human emotion and the pressing need to channelise communication between individuals.

B. Loneliness as Predicament in "The Lawn Party"

The novelist and short-story writer Ann Beattie published her collection of short stories, entitled Park City, in 1998. "The Lawn Party" belongs to that collection, a story ostensibly about a Fourth of July family party, but one that has undercurrents of failed ambition in love and life, as well as dealing with the aftermath of a death. Upon a close comparison between this and the Carver story, a few threads may be identified as having a similarity quotient. Both stories are penned by authors who were famously grouped within the minimalist, no-nonsense, and straightforward style of writing that came to the forefront by the beginning of the 1980s, mainly due to their appearance in major literary magazines. Both stories deal with the loss of a relationship and the loss of a loved one, both of which occur within a familial setting. Carver and Beattie did not hold with the label associated with their craft, and both are on record expressing their dissatisfaction at such delimitation –

"Ann Beattie has quite rightly noted that "people never say things like 'James Joyce, he was mired in Dublin, wasn't he? He stayed close to home, didn't he? I mean, if that is what they have to say about Joyce, that is a reductive approach to the work. And I feel the same about my work." (Herzinger 1985) [2].

The location is the family home of the first-person narrator in Connecticut, and it is populated with his close family and acquaintances who have gathered to participate in a croquet match on the family lawns. On a comparison between the shifts in language between Carver's story and this one, a certain sophistication of purpose can be reasonably detected in Beattie's handling of her tale. It is not so much to say that the story is not simply written, as that it does not depend on brevity as much as did the Carver text. The narrator is alienated from his family, a fact evident from the moment his tale begins, where he spares nobody from the focus of his sharp wit and unsatisfactory behaviour. His ten-year-old daughter's worldview is dissected as profusely as is her mother's disdain for the narrator's situation. The story is rich in adornments and verbal detail, matching the property and person it describes. There is not much in terms of motive where the narrator is concerned, as he is suffering from the effects of a debilitating accident, cocooning himself in his intellect and judgmental demeanour.

The tonal changes in the narrator's contribution to the tale here are in sharp contradistinction to the laid-back approach of the narrator in Carver's tale. This narrator (who goes unnamed) is very much the centre of his own story and its crux too. On discovering that his right arm had been entirely amputated, he refuses the help of any prosthetics, by quipping that he preferred air in the place of his absent arm – "'Air' I told him. This needed amplification. 'Air where my arm used to be.'" (Beattie 1999) [5]. Taking pleasure in the discomfort of others seems to be a regular occurrence for Beattie's protagonist, affording him some small comfort for the harsh reduction in his circumstances. The reader learns that he is an art teacher by profession, and therefore, the loss of his right arm will severely restrict the choices before him. If, as Herzinger mentions, "all works of literature can be read, sometimes profitably, as a response to malaise or moral confusion" (Herzinger 1985) [2], then we may see many an example of it in the boorish behaviour of the narrator here. He is so evidently and unashamedly bitter about his plight that he does not desist from making self-deprecatory jokes, perhaps to invite more companionship, possibly to push away well-wishers – "My left hand is there to wipe with, but who wants to set down his beer bottle to wipe his mouth?" (Beattie 1999) [5]. It is another matter whether all his efforts at appearing a smart aleck endear him to potential readers.

"The Lawn Party" works on many levels, unlike "What We Talk About." The quasi-banality of the protagonist's current situation reveals a complex web of relationships beneath the light banter and teasing. The reader learns that the principal character led a life of infidelity and resorted to duplicitous lies to evade the notice of his wife, While secretly continuing to date his sister-in-law. The narrator is almost unprincipled

in his disclosure to the reader that he did his part in letting his wife and the mother of his child know about his attachment to her sister – "If I had not fallen in love with her sister, everything would still be fine between us. I did it fairly; I fell in love with her sister before the wedding." (Beattie 1999) [5]. The critic Lee Konstantinou, in a broad-ranging essay on the concept of neorealist fiction in the genre of the novel, states that it is a term which may be used to "describe new modes of realism that don't so much overthrow post-modernism as make an uneasy peace with it." (Konstantinou 2017) [6]. The art of representation, as depicted here by Beattie, evokes the structures of realism-heavy storytelling, particularly in the detailing of the narrator's motives. It seems almost as if he wishes to lash out at everyone who is not in the same sorry situation as himself – he too, like Mel in Carver's story, harbours resentment, this time against parents and close family members (his brother, the family cook, his estranged wife). The biggest reveal of the story is dropped nonchalantly by him when he mentions, almost as an aside, that it was his lover Patricia (the sister-in-law) who was driving the car which led to the fatal accident – "Patricia – that was her name – went with me on business trips, met me for lunches and dinners, and was driving my car when it went off the highway." (Beattie 1999) [5].

Beattie's strength as a minimalist, if we go by the labelling given to her, is unmistakable in the way she layers her narrative. The readers, by following the spiel of the text, have no problem in deducing the psychological weight of the dismemberment and the accident on the narrator's life. Flippant as he chooses to be with his (other) sister-in-law Danielle, he is suffering from depression and is unable to deal with the sudden loss of his lover. Not only is the loss weighing on him, but he is also quite unable to make sense of Patricia's motives for driving them off the road. This is mandated by the many times he tries to come up with a story that explains the unfortunate incident. When his daughter refuses to entertain his request to hear his tale, he instead recounts it to his art student, Banks –

"I was going to drop her off at the shopping centre, where she had left her car, and she was going to continue to her castle, and I would go to mine … And then she tried to kill us. She did kill herself." (Beattie 1999) [5].

The ennobling trait of the story is that the protagonist, boorish and ill-mannered as he is, does not draw back from admitting his depression, in the process also revealing his inability to come to terms with his new life quickly. He is constantly at the receiving end of sympathetic comments, but his disability affects his responses towards his family. He refuses to join the lawn party five times in the space of the text, not acceding to the requests of his mother, father, Danielle, or his daughter. He prefers to reflect on his plight, either by himself or with his student Banks for company. He blithely dismisses the careful ministrations of his doctor, or his assigned psychiatrist, or the hospital-mandated chaplain. Instead, he chooses to take refuge in throwing verbal darts at his extended family while in conversation with Danielle, also taking the opportunity to fetishise her feet to take his mind off his travails. Upon closer inspection, Beattie appears to have portrayed a man with a fragile ego and a high sense of self-worth, left bereft by a cruel turn of fate. By taking a step back and looking at the entire picture, the reader cannot help but wonder at the broken portrait of a well-educated, confident man, albeit one with secrets and the mundane betrayals that dot everyday family history. His relationship with the women in his life – his wife, his daughter – needs a lot of work, and this can only be achieved if he first wills himself to recognise his shortcomings. The hurt is well hidden, but despite the narrator's poise, the burdens and alienations of a lonely life spent reflecting on the vagaries of chance and choice may well consume the narrator, if not taken under control in good time.

III. CONCLUSION

Delineating the vastness of the realist form from the newly emergent minimalist or neorealist fiction is a challenging task for any critic, especially when considering the richness found in the works of writers such as Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie. Their minute worldbuilding, wedded to the direct prose style and brevity of words, is striking in the difference it makes against other styles of writing which preceded this. Sandra Lee Kleppe, in her appraisal of Carver, notes that the legacy of his oeuvre has permeated multiple classroom discussions and fostered growing interdisciplinary critical inquiries (Kleppe 2010) [7]. The eponymous *What We Talk About* collection is credited with bringing the minimalist iconography into play, and Carver's "shock of the minimal, almost skeletal, and often lyrically powerful language" (Kleppe 2010) [7], employed is a testament to his literary gift that marked a shift in stylistics from postmodernism. As Herzinger also points out, while postmodernism and minimalism may both know "that there are as many ways for a text to be 'about' things as there are things to be about" (1985) [2], the use of ordinary, everyday language and constructs, the ordinary ideation of living, helps to strip away the accumulated baggage of complex literary values, leaving a well-thought-out minimalist tradition that is an easy turn for all kinds of readers across discrete socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Ann Beattie similarly demonstrates her perspicacity and accuracy in capturing city life in isolation, dealing with unspoken loss, longing, and hope (the spoiled black-sheep narrator). It can be said of both Carver and Beattie that their characters' experiences are thoroughly enumerated, revealing their prejudices while sheltering their fears and inviting a chance for hope to reclaim its place in the mundanity of commonplace lives.

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