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# Raymond Carver and the Menacing Search for Identity and Intimacy

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Raymond Carver and the Menacing Search for Identity and Intimacy

by

Michael J. Bittlingmaier

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York

College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Raymond Carver and the Menacing Search for Identity and Intimacy

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## Abstract

Raymond Carver has been called the master of menace by many critics who suggest his characters are devoid of self-awareness and have very few redeeming qualities regarding emotional growth. The menacing aspect of his work has been viewed by many readers as a plot-oriented tool that places the characters in hopeless situations the author refuses to let them out of, confining them to lives of “emotional paralysis and terror” (Wickenden 38). I intend to demonstrate the contrary, that this menace is actually an incidental occurrence that derives from characters whose fears of being insubstantial are a result of identities in crisis. Failure to achieve a true delineated self provides the menace or tension that initiates the decision Carver’s characters are forced to make: to remain passively constrained by identity foreclosure or diffusion, or to liberate themselves from their self-imposed confines to actively set forth into moratorium: the explorative process of “forging an identity” (Marcia, Patterson, and Sochting 12).

While Developmental psychologist James A. Marcia’s identity statuses will provide a template for these adult characters experiencing a prolonged adolescent identity crisis, Erik H. Erikson’s sixth stage of human development, Intimacy versus Isolation, will emphasize the lives of characters who fail to obtain true intimacy and who thus remain passive in their search for identity. 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.

## Chapter One: Introduction

While the end of adolescence thus is the stage of an overt identity crisis, identity formation neither begins nor ends with adolescence: it is a lifelong development largely unconscious to the individual and to his society. -Erik H. Erikson, Identity and the Life Cycle, (1980)

Much has been written about the hopeless outcomes of Raymond Carver's short stories. These critical commentaries suggest that Carver's characters are inarticulate underachievers, beaten by life, only to be left destitute by a cruel author whose taste for menace leaves them suspended in an abyss of ambiguity. As literary critic Richard Eder put it, "Most of the pain in these mostly painful stories is that of deterioration. Marriages, feelings, endeavors run down, partly from selfishness or lack of vision but mainly because there is no society to sustain them" (3). For Eder and several other critics who acknowledge the explicit despair in Carver's work, the lack of hope is overshadowed only by the lack of redeeming qualities these characters possess, and the constraining factor that encapsulates these anti-heroes inside a determinist state of doom is the author's insistence on the stylized use of menace. While critic Michael Foley acknowledges Carver's thematic tone of "aimlessness, worthlessness, insubstantiality, indecision or regret" (12), others point out Carver's brevity of language and abrupt, ambiguous endings, which further complicates the discovery of any definitive meaning. All this and more can be credited to the implementation of menace. The overall observation, of course, is that menace is used as a plot oriented technique that places these characters in hopeless situations the author will not let them get out of.

While there is much truth in the analysis of these Carver scholars, the intent of this thesis is to offer a contrary view of menace, regarding it as a conduit for character growth rather than a device used to abandon the characters in a fictitious world of ill-fated futility. After all, each character must reach a certain level of humility before he or she can be redeemed--and several are. In fact, this menace is not created by dark contrived scenarios, for the scenarios are commonly real; instead, it is fortified by narrative, symbolism, and characterization magnified by an artistic incorporation of spare language and inarticulate dialogue that highlights the truthful nature of these often naïve but reflective characters. While ambiguity is the plot device used, though not technically a plot element, the inconclusive nature of the fate of Carver's characters helps denote the human plight of being undefined. In fact, a psychological examination of these endings might suggest perpetual possibilities, rather than abrupt finalities, and the menace used by Carver adds a much needed tension that does not halt the movement of the characters but instead keeps their growth in what Carver calls "relentless motion" (Fires 17). In effect, the ambiguity and menace help aid the active search for identity for characters who are living diffused and foreclosed lives. In other words, they are adults raised on blue-collar ideals weighed down by false ideologies and stifling self-images that keep them in a purgatory of sustained adolescent identity passivity--waiting for an opportunity to forge a definitive identity.

Equally important to note, however, is the need to achieve intimacy in order to discover identity. Carver reviewer, Paul Gray, points out this problem with Carver's characters, suggesting, "Something in their lives denies them a sense of community. They feel this lack intensely, yet are too wary of intimacy to touch other people, even

with language” (95). In effect, menace is the transitional shift in their lives, from a passive to active identity search, which is deterred by a lack of intimacy. Therefore, menace is an incidental occurrence evolving from the realistic internal conflict resulting from the fear of being insubstantial. These stories highlight identities in crisis.

A character’s response to his or her failure to achieve “a clearly delineated self-definition” (Waterman 57) thus creates identity bereavement--the sense of loss that that comes from losing one’s sense of self. The search for identity then becomes the issue that is at the forefront of Raymond Carver’s stories: not the futility of life, but the possibility of creating a new understanding of oneself by discovering one’s true place in life. The menace and ambiguity in Carver’s fiction is merely the next step toward the active search for oneself, or for identity moratorium--as theorized by James Marcia and his Four Identity Statuses.

Although several characters fail to make the leap, Carver does not look to denigrate them but to offer them hope of liberation. His common use of epiphanic endings, as suggested by several critics (like Ewing Campbell and Gunter Leypoldt) establishes the step into the realm of identity achievement--crossing the boundary of diffusion and foreclosure into moratorium. As William Stull asserts, “Carver maintained that great literature is life-connected, life affirming, and life changing” (6).

The failure to obtain the rewards of familial, marital, and social intimacy further instigates the menace of foreclosure and diffusion, thus repelling growth and passively restraining the characters from finding identity--leading to stagnation.

Therefore, failure to obtain true intimacy is what stifles the search for self. A foreclosed marriage driven by false intimacy is a common debilitating factor of a fragmented identity. A character becomes absorbed in trivial pursuits and fails to see identity growth. Unfortunately, there are several examples of this defeat in Carver's stories; however, for every failure, Carver breathes life into a character of another story. Every short story collection has its victory of realized identity and gained intimacy.

The intimacy factor will be demonstrated by using Erik H. Erikson's sixth stage of human development, Intimacy versus Distantation, as a backdrop to examine several contemporary, intimacy theories by developmental psychologists like Sally L. Archer, Alan S. Waterman, and Jacob L. Orlofsky. While failed intimacy encourages a passive pursuit of identity, the obtainment of real intimacy or acknowledgement of a failed relationship may lead to the revelatory realization that an individual is not whole and a moratorium must begin. Many of his stories end on this note, thus fortifying the belief that a character is stifled by hopelessness. However, recognition of the problem is what frees the Carver character. The three elements of Intimacy versus Distantation (Repudiation, Isolation, and Destruction) can be broken down to examine various collections.

Repudiation in earlier works such as Will You Please Be Quiet, Please (1976) will demonstrate the negative and positive effects that a character incurs when he denies or disregards that which is not healthy. Failing to see validity in significant relationships has an adverse effect, while eradicating a harmful influence provides a positive outcome. The failed examples should be viewed as a learning tool, not as a

definitive statement about the futility of life.

The second element, Isolation, will incorporate the stories of Cathedral (1983) to illustrate characters who wall others out or observe life from a distance without investing anything. This emotional building of barriers is often exemplified by the failure or inability to communicate. While, again, there are examples of failure, various stories offer counterparts, and Carver's masterpiece, "A Small Good Thing," presents the reader with an enlightening communal epiphany or collective cleansing that turns tragedy into Generativity--an Erikson stage that can only be achieved by intimately embracing individuals on a familial, marital, and social level.

The final element of Intimacy versus Distantation is Destruction: to annihilate social and marital bonds for self-prophesized failure and to break away from false intimacy by destroying dysfunctional factors in a relationship, which in turn stalls identity achievement. Alcohol, violence, and infidelity are common destructive factors which run rampant throughout the stories of Carver's What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (1981) which is usually fodder for most of the negative literary criticism. However, Carver once again gives us counterparts for most failures.

An additional psychological focus regarding self-discovery by eliminating barriers of false intimacy and marital foreclosure is the psychological study of narrative. The first person narrative in "Fat" and "Cathedral" demonstrate contemporary theories of identity such as the narrative study of personology. Renowned psychological methodologists Dan P. McAdams and Donald Polkinghorne set the stage for the examination of reflective, aleatory, and indirect first person narrative as it is used to show the narrator's need to purge by retelling or talking out

the influential events of their lives. The sharing of one's life is an intimate act, no matter how trivial the conversation. A dialogue, or even a monologue for that matter, represents an exchange or a giving away of something vital. The actual telling constitutes growth and is a healthy step toward intimacy.

## Chapter Two: Menace and the Search for the Achieved Delineated Self

### A. The Menacing Strain

It's their lives they've become uncomfortable with, lives they see breaking down. They'd like to set things right but can't. - Raymond Carver, Fires, (1983)

Raymond Carver's characters are individuals whose lives are in disarray. They lack social and economic mobility and have great difficulty expressing or articulating their struggle. At the end of each story, they appear to be destined for futility by the world Carver creates for them--a world where menace sweeps through seemingly dull and ordinary neighborhoods, invading beds, living rooms, kitchens, driveways, and mailboxes.

Carver's brand of destitution and numbing familiarity is emphasized by David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips:

His characters are unemployed and the unhappily employed, laconic members of the upwardly mobile working and middle-classes. Their marriages are without intimacy, their needs unexpressed, unrealized or sublimated into vague dreams of change for the better. They are the folks next door, familiar representatives of "the real America." (75)

While the prospect of walking behind one of these individuals in a supermarket checkout line may be slightly uncomfortable and a little ominous, the idea that any American citizen could actually, one day, be in the same unfortunate circumstances as a Carver character may be primarily what incites the most fear. Moreover, Carver's pension for menace reminds the reader that at any given moment

a seemingly peaceful life can be swept into a sea of chaos.

However, a close examination of Carver's prose discussing menace in the essay "On Writing," may add a softer tone to the menacing aspect of his work and shed some light on its definable properties as the author uses them:

I think a little menace is fine to have in a story. For one thing, it's good for the circulation. There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion, or else, most often, there simply won't be a story. What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things. (Fires 17)

The first thing we must recognize about Carver's comments on menace is his acknowledgement of tension which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "The action of stretching or condition of being stretched," which is suspected to have its earliest origins from 16<sup>th</sup> century medical Latin (188). Carver begins by saying "it's good for the circulation," imbuing tension with a positive quality, rather than the negative one often associated with menace. Circulation is literally needed for obvious physiological reasons, while the figurative meaning has several implications which can be directed to an alternative definition of tension: "A straining or strained condition of the mind, feelings, or nerves" (188). The mind, feelings, or nerves, are all emotional capacities that must be relieved or stretched beyond their current or

imminent boundaries: "... a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion..." (Fires 17). This tension is what characters need to feel in order to forge ahead of their current status, yielding a perpetuation of plot and conflict, even though the threat, often associated with menace--especially in a literary schema--is a much valued suffering. Growth is achieved through humility, or what Dorothy Wickenden calls, "...communion through suffering" (38). The menace, therefore, creates a stretching or shifting of a character's current designated existence. Such a shift marks a discontinuation of those things that were once routine, the things Carver's characters thought mattered but now lack substance. In effect, this transitional shifting is a disintegration of their lives as they once perceived them, "... lives they become uncomfortable with, lives they see breaking down" (Fires 201). Their suffering comes from the "strain" that forces them to seek beyond that which confines them. This "strain" or menace can be construed as the literary conflict, of the internal nature, that rarely becomes solidified by narrative or character understanding. The sufferers cannot clearly define that which menaces them because they cannot clearly define themselves.

Critic Arthur A. Brown gives a literary and life-affirming statement directly regarding Carver's partiality for this application of menace in his essay "Raymond Carver and Postmodern Humanism" countering that "there are more than artistic or technical reasons for the danger, for what is usually at stake is a character's identity, a character on the brink of being and not being" (129). Rather than view Carver's use of menace as a plot twist, a technique for characterization, or a ploy to shock reader's with a dirty, unadorned realism, Brown understands that this menacing aspect is

simply a natural or incidental occurrence that exists whenever a character experiences a crisis of identity. Therefore that which threatens our existence or identity, as we perceive it, can be construed as the essential existential menace itself, which encapsulates the dread that is generated from the same knowledge of one's eventual annihilation.

Because our perceptions of ourselves are often woefully short sighted, the threat of discovering that we are not who we thought we were is constant. These are characters in a constant search for identity. This failed search for significance lays the foundation for the ambiguity for which Carver is often rebuked. There are restrictions that come from the inability to articulate one's pain. These restrictions are what Carver suggested as "the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things" (Fires 17). Coupled with Carver's "minimalist" aspects and ambiguous endings, these characters who lack self-delineation, indeed, suffer; but there is the hope for redemption that comes from the menacing strain that forces them to search beyond that which confines them. Beyond the surface is the implication of something better, something more palpable to the eye that cannot physically be seen. There is a redeeming quality, under the surface of things; like a landscape, it is an external beauty that Carver inverts, paradoxically; internalizing it, positioning it within the characters, rather than outside of them. Their job, the characters, is to find it and discover the enlightenment of the soul within the dark fissures of discontent.

While Carver may evoke the desire to clutch at the souls of inarticulate individuals devoid of maturation, it is essential for us to see the substance within that

soul and “to know that souls are never dull, that their scenery is infinitely more subtle than mere mountains” (Houston 104). Thus, the possibility of discovering a new landscape under a weathered base, taut with tension, is the permeable atmosphere of hope, disguised as menace, offering a chance for redemption as it pertains to the search for one’s true identity.

### B. Identity Crisis: Mourning To Moratorium

Mourning is the process of adapting to the losses of our life... the mourning we do at the death of people we love. But we may mourn in a similar fashion the end of marriage, the coming apart of a special friendship, the losses of what we’d once had...been...hoped might be. - Judith Viorst, Necessary Losses (1986)

A couple’s life is shattered when their young son dies after a car accident; they confront a seemingly insensitive baker to find a non-existent solace in a quarrel. A man pushes his wife to the floor, bloodying her teeth, then drinks away the pain after discovering her infidelity which occurred two years prior. Another man reasons that his marriage is safe even though his wife has told an unforgivable lie--for he has known many trusted friends who lie pathologically. A woman sobs hysterically in shame because a strange man in a bar has offered her money for a brief sexual encounter outside, and she is ashamed because she considered accepting the offer because of her struggling financial predicament. These are the vexations of Raymond Carver characters. Their lives feel dismantled and they mourn with uncontrollable sadness who they presently are, based on their ideas of who they thought they were and where they thought they would be. These are desperate individuals, who, unfortunately for them, feel disenfranchised from that which comprises their individuality. Once a person becomes disillusioned with himself, he reacts much in

the same way he might respond to a death in the family: he mourns. This identity bereavement is the common plight of a Raymond Carver character. But the responses and outcomes vary.

When a change is disruptive, a person may not feel that he knows himself; he is said to experience a crisis in identity when conditions change, but a person may conceal from himself conflicting selves, possibly by ignoring or disguising one or more of them, or by branding one a stranger. (Skinner 170)

The tension which is often described as menace by many Carver critics is caused by bereavement due to this crisis in identity. Aspects of this struggle are demonstrated in Carver's thematic content of infidelity, alcoholism, unemployment, failure to communicate, and the voyeuristic tendencies to superimpose their empty lives onto the apparently satisfying lives of others; all of which are catalysts for the transitional movement into identity achievement or the more common outcome of Carverian menace, stagnancy. This stagnancy could be construed as what as what James E. Marcia defined as identity diffusion: the failure to commit to an identity; or identity foreclosure: being committed to beliefs or goals without having experienced a period of exploration (Marcia, Patterson, and Sochting 10-11), thus being exposed to the possibility of disillusionment later on in life. Expanding on Erikson's human developmental stages, Marcia developed the four identity statuses: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement. While people experiencing identity diffusion are often characterized as non-committed individuals who are "empty and dissatisfied" (Marcia, Patterson, and Sochting 11), people with

foreclosed identities are committed to identities but usually adopt the values passed down by their parents without having explored alternative goals. Moratorium, on the other hand, is the process of identity exploration with the primary goal of discovering identity; however, identity achievement is the successful result of moratorium, the discovery of an identity and committing to it (Marcia, Patterson, and Sochting 11-12). Alan S. Waterman, who expanded on Marcia's identity statuses, claims that the identity achieved individual makes the final commitment because "the chosen goals, values, and beliefs are judged worthy of giving a direction, purpose, and meaning to life" ("Identity Formation: Discovery or Creation?" 331). The problem with Carver's characters is that they lack this direction, purpose and meaning. As a result they are left in a state of stagnancy.

Thus, the plight of the Carver character is that of an individual experiencing a prolonged adolescence--those who never really committed, or those who were thrown into adulthood without having spent the time growing. It is only later that some seek out a moratorium. Psychologist Gerald R. Adams reiterates Marcia's theory by suggesting that moratorium is a result of a person's understanding of his own identity crisis and his exploration of alternatives, in hopes of finally identifying self-defined ideological commitments (10). However, the beginning of the moratorium stage is often where Carver's stories end, insinuating a physically imperceptible but hopeful genesis of growth.

In "Fat" the first story in Carver's first short story collection, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please, a waitress recounts an incident when she serves an enormously fat gentleman whose appetite is relentless. She then tells of a sexual experience with her

boyfriend that happened later that evening, recalling that she suddenly felt herself incredibly fat, "...so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (8). The effect of meeting the fat customer had caused her to examine her self, resulting in the revelation that, "My life is going to change. I feel it" (Will You Please... 8). This revelation is what Gunter Leypoldt calls "an arrested epiphany," which refers to a character's acknowledgement that an epiphany or insightful event has occurred but the character isn't quite sure what to make of it. It is as if she knows she has crossed the boundary from diffusion to moratorium, but isn't sure what the results will bring. Leypoldt expands:

That is to say, the centers of consciousness realize, with an often disquieting sense of menace, that there is something out of joint in their world, that at some level they are on the brink of making a tremendous discovery, but they remain far from grasping what exactly it could be. (4)

Thus, the moratorium marked by the waitress is her understanding that she is not content with what she is, and alternatives must be explored. She has been "empowered by the fat man to break off with the insensitive cook..." and to explore the possibilities of something better, more valuable (Meyer 34). Kirk Nessel regards this transformation as a result of her projecting vision, "from non-self to mountains of self, identifying with the fat man and his determined world, at once accepting and struggling against determinism, against the complacency that imprisons" (16). Although the inconclusive nature of the ending hardly demonstrates a complete awareness of self, it does provide her and the reader with awareness that her life has

been stagnant up to that point, and change is needed. Her recognition of her unachieved identity is her first step toward a moratorium.

An optimistic reading of “Collectors,” another story from Will You Please Be Quiet, Please, provides the reader with a glimpse into the life of an unemployed man whose real identity is never truly known to the reader, the vacuum cleaner salesman who visits him, or to the man himself. The unidentified man is a construct of the unachieved identity – “no name, no power” (“Carver’s Collectors” 54). It appears he is in hiding, isolating himself from those who wish to expose him. However, he is exposed and forced to acknowledge the fragments of his life that, up to this point, have amounted to nothing. When the salesman gives his perfunctory demonstration, running the vacuum cleaner over the mattress, he tells the unwilling observer:

Mr... You’ll be surprised to see what can collect in a mattress over the months, over the years. Every day, every night of our lives, we’re leaving little bits of ourselves, flakes of this and that behind. Where do they go, these bits and pieces of ourselves? Right through the sheets and into the mattress, that’s where! Pillows, too. It’s all the same.

(Will You Please... 105)

These words resonate for the man whose life is stagnant, seemingly hopeless, generating no upward growth. The parts of his marital identity have ironically dissolved into the domestic symbols of mattresses and bed pillows.

He tells the salesman, “You’re going to have to write me off as a dead loss, that’s all. You’re wasting your time on me...” (Will You Please... 109). He is stuck in a state of immobility, refusing to “surrender his last vestige of self” (Boxer and

Phillips 87) and to see what he has become. He fears giving his true identity (to the salesman and perhaps to himself) because he is unclear what that might be. Although his future seems hopeless, as many critics have stated, the possibility of moratorium could be interpreted in the last few lines.

...You want the vacuum or not?

I looked at the big case, closed now and ready to move on,

No, I said, I guess not. I'm going to be leaving here soon. It would just be in the way.

All right, he said, and he shut the door. (Will You Please... 110)

He is a man stymied into a state of self-dormancy. However, he is aware of his immobile condition and understands there is no need to collect the bits and pieces of himself that have rendered him such. Any means that attempts to capture the failed aspects of his unsuccessful life would preserve his unwanted stagnancy and, of course, "just be in the way." While it is not entirely certain whether he will move on or not, his acknowledgement of the obstacle demonstrates awareness and allows for the hope that his desire to leave will result in an active pursuit of identity achievement.

Like "Collectors," the last lines of Carver's stories tend to establish a pattern for those characters who have reached the understanding that their current lives are failed and stagnant. One could construe the last lines as indications or epiphanic utterances of a moratorium that will soon be under way, or as literary critic Arthur A. Brown states: "Moments of sudden clarity are moments of seeing, and these moments are dangerous and mysterious, like the wind. Our very identities are changing" (127)

The last two lines from “Put Yourself in My Shoes” demonstrate the awareness that a change is occurring: “He was silent and watched the road. He was at the very end of a story” (Will You Please... 152). These lines signify an understanding that the main character realizes his current life (or story) must be aborted. The action of transport or transience in his automobile suggest his moratorium. In “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please,” the protagonist experiences the unrest of metamorphosis: “He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep, and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him” (251). Another example comes from “Neighbors,” a story about a couple who have projected their monotonous lives into the lives of neighbors they are house sitting for. Once they finally lock themselves out of the neighbor’s apartment, they are forced to examine who they are together: “They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves” (Will You Please... 16). Although the desperation of the situation might suggest failure, the key for discovery is in their togetherness. They recognize their passive state together, and embrace each other for mutual support as they prepare for the leap into unknown territory. It is a dual discovery, much like the one in “Cathedral”. When an unruly protagonist offers his assistance to a blind friend of his wife’s, his charitable action rewards both men. With eyes shut he eases the blind man’s hand onto a piece of paper to draw a cathedral. The vision that comes from discovery of the protagonist’s intangible blindness, provoked by a kinesthetic examination of a cathedral, marks a commencement into self-awareness. The awe of the protagonist is evident in the last lines when he says, “My eyes were closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside

anything. / 'It's really something,' I said" (Cathedral 228).

While the climactic revelation, absent of denouement, is not altogether uncommon in Raymond Carver's stories, it is the interpretation that completes the story. Those critics clinging to the idea of nihilistic menace may argue that an ambiguous ending marks an inconclusive illustration of plot or characterization; however, astute readers recognize Carver's empathetic nature. Carver knows that a character who acknowledges the need for a change is embarking on a journey to claim an identity. Critics who interpret a hopeless ending concede defeat over the initial signs of self-discovery; they fail to see the importance that a moratorium begins to materialize just as the stories come to a close. For these are characters, previously in disrepair, who have seen glimpses of their foreclosure and wish to claim a new life for themselves by seeking a moratorium that becomes possible because of the last few words the author empowers them with.

## Chapter Three: Intimacy to Achieve Identity

### A. Intimacy Versus Distantation

Disassociation is a sense of disengagement from one's own identity and life, a state of standing apart from whatever defines the self, or of being unselfed. - David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver," (1979)

Since Carver's topics predominately explore the disintegration and subsequent end of marital, familial, social, and occupational relationships, aspects of intimacy must be examined. The failure to maintain the bonds of these relationships can be observed as the inability to obtain true intimate relationships. In "Identity: A Precursor to Intimacy," contemporary clinicians of psychological developmental theory, Gerald R. Adams and Sally L. Archer define the general constructs of identity in three parts: personality, social living, and family relationships. These three parts, when viewed in passive identity formation expose individuals who avoid close relationships, restrict insight and limited analytic ability, experience social disorganization, alienation, and have minimal family interaction and affection (200-01). These passive characteristics, as defined by psychologists Patricia M. Raskin and Alan S. Waterman, stand out excessively: "Less sophisticated, more passive approaches to identity formation, such as foreclosure and identity diffusion statuses, are associated with either relative isolation or traditional role oriented approaches to relationships" (214). While Carver's characters illustrate dysfunctional approaches to traditional relationships, it is the inability to obtain true intimacy that causes this failure. The need to isolate themselves from loved ones and society is what constitutes their diffusion. Thus, these diffused interpersonal relationships confine

them to passive roles in their own identity achievement.

In his essay, "Identity as an Aspect of Optimal Psychological Functioning," Alan S. Waterman reiterates the problem of intimacy in regard to identity diffused and foreclosed individuals:

A large body of research has been carried out relating a personal sense of identity to the capacity for intimacy in relationships. Consistently, individuals in the identity achievement status have been found to be in the highest statuses regarding intimacy as well. In general, individuals in the foreclosure status tend to approach relationships in a stereotyped, role-bound manner, while identity diffusions have the most difficulty with intimacy. (65)

Since very few of Carver's characters have obtained identity achievement, it is no wonder failed intimacy is regarded as a correlative for diffused and foreclosed persons. Thus, a lack of intimacy is the key element to the fundamental crisis of identity experienced by the Carverian protagonist. While many critics have accused Carver of creating a vast desert of desperation for his characters, they fail to recognize the authenticity provided by Carver's masterful use of technique in regard to his realistic interpretations as they exhibit these common problems that arise in human psychosocial identity development. Erik H. Erikson's sixth psychosocial stage of development, Intimacy versus Isolation, is useful to examine the inadequacies of Carver's characters while maintaining the belief that identity formation cannot be fully developed without the ability to understand it and achieve true intimacy. Erikson explicitly states that intimacy cannot be accrued before one has achieved a

self-delineated sense of identity. The failure to gain identity achievement produces individuals who experience dysfunction in all types of relationships due to their identity diffused or foreclosed statuses. Adams and Archer examine Erikson's views on Identity and Intimacy:

The importance of identity formation to social life is seen in the theorized association between identity and intimacy. Although Erikson views identity formation as a central developmental task of adolescence, its major importance to adulthood is reflected in its foundational implications for the formation of intimate social relationships. Erikson suggests that the resolution of identity is a precursor to the ability to formulate and maintain intimacy. In referring to intimacy, he defines it as a sharing or fusing of identities. Further he proposes that intimacy involves a capacity to make commitments to others and to maintain the ethical strength to abide by commitments, even in the face of tempting and desirable alternatives. Without an active form of identity, the individual is thus thought not to possess the necessary components of a healthy personality and is unable to make commitments to others or to abide ethically by commitments made. (194)

Therefore, the inability to properly acquire a fully achieved identity, stultifies the possibility of obtaining real intimacy with others, which, in effect, further creates individuals who lack the substantial ability to commit to all the different varieties of relationships which are needed to live a healthy and productive life within a

community.

While the Intimacy versus Isolation stage must not being ignored, inquiry into whether identity achievement precedes it, must ensue. Although few argue against the negative responses that result in the failure to find true intimacy, the argument is usually centered around the question of appearance: Is an individual required to achieve an identity before he can obtain intimacy? Adams and Archer suggest problems with the Erikson model:

In brief, Erikson proposed that the resolution of a sense of identity versus role confusion is a necessary and compelling task of adolescence. Further, he proposed that this resolution must be accomplished before intimacy formation. Men without a firm and actively construed sense of self will be unable to commit to another with either depth or ethical strength to abide by commitments made.

(203)

In other words, men must achieve a sense of identity before they can find true intimacy. However, Erikson's male Eurocentric paradigm also suggests the opposite for women, claiming they need fulfillment of intimacy to discover identity, while Adams, Archer, Raskin, and Waterman theorize that the development of intimacy is in direct relation to identity formation (McKinney 255). Therefore, inadequacies regarding intimacy place an imposing strain on the process of identity achievement long after adolescence is completed. Thus, one could argue that Erikson's order of stages would suggest the inability to properly sustain a healthy achieved identity status while the other psychological theorists would claim the procession of identity

concludes that intimacy must initially be completed before identity achievement. Either way, Erikson and the others do not contest the importance of obtaining true intimacy in regard to healthy psychosocial human development. Therefore, intimacy becomes an intricate part of identity development. Erikson's model of Intimacy versus Distantation can be viewed to examine the inability for Carver's characters to obtain proper identity achievement as a result of failed appropriation of intimate relationships.

While intimacy is the first goal of adulthood, it is not an understatement to point out that most of Carver's characters convey intimacy inadequacies. This can be seen in many of the principle themes of Raymond Carver's short stories: commitment to spouses, family, friendships, industry, and society as a whole. These themes illuminate characters whose diffusion and identity foreclosure has alienated them from the populace which in turn deters them from interacting with others in a well adjusted manner. Therefore, intimate social relationships cannot be gained.

While social intimacy is essential, intimacy between spouses, family, and sexual partners is of primary importance as well. Intimacy, Erikson tells us, is separated into two categories: sexual versus real intimacy. He refers to the latter as a "true and mutual psychological intimacy with another person," and in regard to defining one's identity, notes the negative results of the former:

There is a kind of adolescent attachment between a boy and a girl which is often mistaken either for mere sexual attraction or love... such attachment is often devoted to an attempt at arriving at a definition of one's identity by talking things over endlessly, by

confessing what one feels like and what the other seems like, and by discussing plans, wishes, and expectations. Where a youth does not accomplish such intimate relations with others--and, I would add, with his own inner resources--in late adolescence or adulthood, he may either isolate himself and find, at best, highly stereotyped and formal interpersonal relations (formal in the sense of lacking in spontaneity, warmth, and real exchange of fellowship), or he must seek them in repeated attempts and repeated failures. (101)

Therefore, this false understanding of intimacy becomes a breeding ground for infidelity, cruelty, obsessive and addictive behavior, as well as deliberate self-imposed isolation. This catapults individuals into a further state of ill-repair, where they become adults who are devoid of the appropriate social skills, leaving them insulated from that which they need the most--human contact forged with real intimacy. Erikson explores this self-debilitating negative result of failed intimacy by labeling the counterpart of Intimacy as Distantation, which is "the readiness to repudiate, to isolate, and, if necessary, to destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one's own" (101). The three elements of Distantation (repudiation, isolation, and destruction) are representational responses to failed identity achievement, which deter the growth of healthy familial and social bonds. These responses are indicative of the diffused repercussions commonly experienced by Raymond Carver's characters whose active identity pursuits have been stalled.

While all three of these elements work concurrently in several stories, an interesting note is the obvious abundance of one of all three elements in three of his

first four major collections: Repudiation is a predominant theme in his first collection, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please, while Destruction is ever apparent in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, a work commonly referred to as a work of nihilistic minimalism. Isolation, on the other hand, stands out in his masterpiece, Cathedral, but does offer several epiphanic suggestions that moratorium toward identity achievement is gained by characters in crisis.

### B. Repudiation in Carver's Earlier Works

The first element of Distantation, Repudiation (the refusal to recognize people or situations that appear to threaten an individual's way of life) is exemplified in several of Raymond Carver's earlier stories where a character's failure to recognize the true nature of himself or others is predominant. While this element is common in foreclosed relationships, there is an allowance for understanding and moratorium for several representative characters in these stories struggling through this phase.

In "The Student's Wife," a young woman must come to terms with her failed marriage, overcoming her previous repudiation of her foreclosed identity. However, her husband's inability to recognize their emotional estrangement indicates his tendency to repudiate her significance as well as his true identity as a husband.

Nan is the wife who is startled by a dream which has grave, symbolic implications of her solitude in her spousal partnership. While her sense of being alone in her marriage is rather evident to the reader, it is her husband, Mike, who fails to recognize, from her dream and their late night dialogue, the immense level of anxiety his wife has regarding the future of their life together.

Nan tries to describe her dream to Mike, even though she cannot remember all

the details:

“I don’t know where the kids were, but it was just the two of us at some little hotel or something. It was on some lake that wasn’t familiar. There was another, older couple there and they wanted to take us for a ride in their motorboat.” She laughed, remembering, and leaned forward off the pillow. “The next thing I recall is we were down at the boat landing. Only the way it turned out, they had just one seat in the boat, a kind of bench up in front, and it was only big enough for three. You and I started arguing about who was going to sacrifice and sit all cooped up in the back. You said you were, and I said I was. But I finally squeezed into the back of the boat. It was so narrow it hurt my legs, and I was afraid the water was going to come over the sides. Then I woke up.” (Will You Please... 124)

While this symbolic vision is a thinly veiled cry for help, Mike indifferently ignores its meaning. Nan is clearly suffering from an identity crisis. She has committed to their relationship but feels alone in their responsibilities. She has made sacrifices, that he appears not to have made, and her reward or compensation for her effort is to be submerged into a sea of obscurity. The missing children represent a fruitless or unsure attempt at posterity, while the old couple is a mirror of the lasting, intimate union they have worked for but may never achieve. Literary critic John Alton in Conversations with Raymond Carver claimed “there’s a relationship between the unconscious and the physical... that’s being recapitulated in the dream motif. The people are disturbed by their circumstances and they dream about it” (164). Because

of her struggle to find appropriate meaning in her waking life, she obtains answers in her slumber. She later refers to the cramped feeling in her legs as growing pains, asking, “Didn’t you ever feel yourself growing?” (Will You Please... 126). But Mike claims he cannot remember, dismissing her attempt at talking out her underlying fear of a foreclosed marriage, failing to see that her recognition of growth and his lack of growth, suggests they are growing apart.

Adams offers some insight into the human response to personal growth through identification of the shipwreck metaphor. He interprets shipwrecks as symbols of faith. The parallels between his observations and Nan’s dream are suggestive accounts of an evolving identity:

Growth, it is argued, begins with suffering. As we let go of some level of belief we feel a collapse of self, a disorientation, a bewilderment, even feelings of emptiness. We are drained of the rich connections that offer us a sense of significance, delight and purpose. We feel shipwrecked... Through shipwreck we come to transform, to discover, move beyond the loss, find new and robust ways of knowing, understanding, being. (8)

Nan’s insomnia and need to talk out her concerns are evidence of her disorientation and emptiness. But the implications of withdrawal toward freedom remain. Unable to get back to sleep, she decides to list all the things that she likes. The things she enjoys are simple and obtainable, from going to movies to having good friends; however, when she states what is most important to her, “...to live a good honest life without having to worry about money and bills and things like that” (Will You Please... 128),

Mike appears to be disinterested. And when she insists he tell her what he likes, he responds by saying, "I wish you'd leave me alone" (128), either not caring or not knowing part of her identity lies in him. His refusal to assuage her fears and address her concerns is the wedge that will eventually lead to her moratorium into a new identity that will not involve him. Although her eventual flight is ambiguously suggested, Carver presents us with symbolic clues. When Nan says she likes flying in airplanes, she states, "There's a moment as you leave the ground you feel whatever happens is all right" (Will You Please... 126). This implies her preparation for flight. She may fear being alone, but she will survive it. This fear may be stressful for Nan but it is an anxiety that is often much needed when breaking free of suffocating marital bonds. Ewing Campbell points out, "The sudden revelation that one, even in the presence of another, must face the void alone is a terrifying recognition, and no less terrifying if it comes as a vague apprehension" (23). While change is frightening, it can be required. However, to make the change Nan must acknowledge the failure of her marriage and repudiate her husband.

After purging herself with tears throughout the night, the morning brings with it the most terrible sunrise she had ever seen. This suggests her awakening, a transitional phase like night becoming day, having to ward off the darkest hours before the lonely and frightful state of renewal can begin. But Mike has slept through it, devoid of the knowledge of his own foreclosed existence and the apparent imminent flight of his wife, Nan. His refusal to appeal to his wife's needs and desires, and failure to assure her of a commitment to their future, is when his foreclosure becomes clear to Nan and to the reader--but he fails to see it.

A common act of repudiation is the falsehood that the apparent satisfaction of one partner is the same for the other partner. This is particularly strong with Mike. He lives the pretense that his wife is content because *he* is content. He assumes a slight descent from intimacy is normal and that problems will eventually work themselves out. However, his blindness to his wife's need to share (likes and dislikes, familiar images of old memories, and a stool on a sinking boat), creates the distance between them. The longer he allows this to go on, the farther apart they become--eventually becoming lost themselves, and separated from the intimacy which had initially bound them. Literary critic Ernest Fontana emphasizes Nan's emotional struggle and Mike's disregard of it: "Although the precise source of Nan's terror is not explicitly identified, the narrative ends with the image of Michael hiding himself from her, denying her intimacy" (448). His repudiation of her needs further isolate them from each other, while her eventual repudiation of him will allow her to segment into a new identity.

"The Lie," from Carver's second collection of work, Furious Seasons, later published in Fires, suggests repudiation in regard to being incapable of acknowledging the irreparable damage that results in the omission of truth. When the male narrator confronts his wife with something a friend said, she responds by telling him the friend lied and can't understand how the husband could believe "a bitch" over his own wife. He's not convinced, claiming the friend would gain no benefit from lying. He reasons, "I love her. I wanted to take her in my arms, hold her, tell her I believed her. But the lie, if it was a lie, had come between us" (Fires 123). He knows the danger of fallacy when it slips between matrimonial bonds. One is denied dignity

and a sense of well being when an intimate partner withholds the truth. The failure to be honest with each other can only result in a false sense of intimacy, which eventually leads to a false sense of self. In effect, lying becomes an act of repudiation, failing to recognize the partner as one deserving “a good honest life.” However, the repudiation highlighted in the story comes mainly from the narrator who demonstrates an ambivalent acceptance of the lie told by his spouse, remembering a true friend of his who was a “spirited liar,” rationalizing that he could indeed coexist with his lying wife:

I was overjoyed with my discovery of this habitual liar from out of my past, this precedent to draw upon for aid in the present crisis in our-- up to now--happy marriage. This person, this spirited liar, could indeed bear out my wife’s theory that there were such people in the world. (Fires 124)

Since the lie is a threat to his existence as it pertains to his marriage, he must dissolve the lie, which he cannot; so he diminishes the importance of it. However, his revelation is short lived, and the absurdity of his initial plan is illustrated by the insignificant “and how was your day?” small talk that follows (125). But the dialogic camouflage doesn’t work. He insists on the truth--only to be diverted again by her sexual advances. This is where the “true and mutual psychological intimacy” (Erikson 101) becomes muffled by the trappings of sexual intimacy. While the reader is never informed what the lie was, one can only assume the couple will not recover. Adam Meyer suggests the problem with this unavoidable obstacle: “There no longer seems to be any objectifiable reality” (75) Therefore, the narrator must repudiate that which

has become harmful to him, so he repudiates the value of the truth.

While the narrator in “The Lie” essentially fails at all attempts to make the lie irrelevant, the title story from Will You Please Be Quiet, Please presents another husband who avoids discussion of a possible lie his wife may have told years prior. This lie, however, is exposed as an act of infidelity which forces him to re-examine his life and all his repressed emotions which had previously manifested his repudiation of the truth--about his wife and about himself.

The story begins by reviewing the past life of Ralph Wyman, starting at eighteen when Ralph experienced his post adolescence moratorium, exploring various courses from law to pre-medical studies and eventually settling on literature. The third person narrative recounts Ralph’s feeling that he was on the verge of an illuminating self-discovery: “But it never came” (Will You Please... 227). During this period he indulged excessively in alcohol consumption, receiving a reputation as well as a nickname for his overindulgent behavior. He would regard this time as his lowest point of humility. He soon meets Marion Ross, courts her and eventually marries her, “. . .but they never let their going together or their subsequent engagement the next summer interfere with their studies” (Will You Please... 229).

There appears to be nothing uncommon about Ralph Wyman as Campbell argues, “Measured by ordinary standards, he progresses as well as can be expected, passing from rudderless immaturity to acceptance of responsibility as husband, parent, and provider” (28). In fact, he shows progressive growth on the surface, but he fails to achieve the identity he had longed for and, instead, he settles on one he feels is deemed appropriate by society. This evident example of a foreclosed identity and

marriage may be argued as the result of placing identity (their college studies) before intimacy (subsequent engagement the next summer). Ralph's passion and desire were never fully explored, due to a long list of idealized priorities and his father's influence that strength and purpose must set precedent. However, Ralph's insistence on routine and purpose has allowed him to suppress any acts of spontaneity and imaginative exploration. He has come to believe that these indulgences of passion are threatening to his current existence, but fails to see his identity foreclosure, blindly accepting the values bestowed upon him by his father. In effect, he repudiates that which is needed, and regards it as that which is detrimental. An example of this is when he and his wife are on their honeymoon in Guadalajara, Mexico:

Ralph was secretly appalled by the squalor and open lust he saw and was anxious to return to the safety of California. But the one vision he would always remember and which disturbed him most of all had nothing to do with Mexico. It was late afternoon, almost evening, and Marian was leaning motionless on her arms over the ironwork balustrade of their rented casita as Ralph came up the dusty road below. Her hair was long and hung down in front over her shoulders, and she was looking away from him, staring at something in the distance. She wore a white blouse with a red scarf at her throat, and he could see her breasts pushing against the white cloth. He had a bottle of dark, unlabeled wine under his arm, and the whole incident put Ralph in mind of something from a film, an intensely dramatic moment in which Marion could be fitted but he could not. (Will You Please...

229)

While the narrative is in the third person, the stream of consciousness is clearly through Ralph's perspective. He claims that the two images have nothing to do with each other, but this is another form of repudiation, and on several levels. Ralph denounces the primitive images of lust in Mexico and convinces himself that California is a contrast to this. However, common American belief often associates California with activity of a sensual and lustful nature. The safety Ralph feels he finds in California is delusional. The claim that the disturbing image of Marion has "nothing to do with Mexico" is another form of repudiation. The two are in fact closely linked. Prior to their honeymoon, they had decided, or he had decided, not to deter their academic goals with their relationship. Perhaps this image is so clear in his mind because it is the first time he sees her as a sensual creature. The image of her breasts against her blouse conjure up sexual feelings he has repressed for fear of seeing her in a new light that would detract from the domestic image he has of her, which he equates with safety. The spontaneity of lust conflicts with his goal oriented idea of himself and his life. These two images together are threatening to his reality, so he denies their connection, but fails to block them from his mind. Any feelings that denounce his current reality and identity status must be eliminated--so he represses his image of his wife as an object of sexual desire.

Another suppressed memory Ralph has is of his college moratorium where alcoholic binges in a fraternity (which infers sexual promiscuity) earned him the nickname of "Jackson," after a bartender at a bar he frequented. This "Jackson" is his alter-ego, a representation of Ralph's sensuality which is in direct conflict with Ralph,

the husband, father, and provider. “Jackson” is a threat to Ralph’s reality, so he must be rendered obsolete. His memory must be repudiated. However, he exists, submerged in Ralph’s imagination, which is also repudiated, suppressed.

His long refusal to inquire about a possible “kiss” that his wife may have had with another man two years prior is another example of denying the relevance of threats directly related to undermining his current reality and status as an individual and husband, as well. In fact, they are directly related. By repressing his feelings about that night and avoiding reproach of his wife, he is allowed to continue believing that his marriage is a good one, and he sees the truth, if it was a sexual transgression, as a danger. But his refusal to openly acknowledge his belief of his wife’s infidelity creates distance--from her and from himself.

Eventually, it is Marion, not Ralph, who asks, “Do you ever think about that party?” (Will You Please... 231). He then demands to know whether Mitchell Anderson kissed her, and she responds by saying a few times. The result is a violent blow to Marion’s mouth. The primal impulse to lash out has finally surfaced. But it is *her* impulsive nature that becomes examined:

“I don’t know what we thought, *I* thought. I don’t know *why* I went, Ralph. It was an impulse, that’s all I can say. It was the wrong impulse.” She paused. “It was my fault that night, Ralph, and I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done anything like that--*I know* that.”

“Christ!” The word leaped out of him. “But you’ve always been that way, Marian!” And he knew at once that he had uttered a new and profound truth. (Will You Please... 235)

Ralph's response exemplifies his past denial of her passionate spontaneity and sensuality, but "also emphasizes the force of his present recognition" (Campbell 29). Up to this point, he has renounced any image of her that would threaten his image of their marriage, which, in turn, puts into question his definition of himself. By angrily affirming that she has always been impulsive, he acknowledges his previous repudiation of her repressed desires and his hidden insecurities about their relationship. He is now forced to examine the state of their marriage and the deep seeded feelings that they both have harnessed for so long. But not before she admits her sexual infidelity with Mitchell Anderson. Consumed with anger, Ralph steps out into the night.

Kirk Nessel discusses Carver's characterization of Ralph as a result of his repressed state and past denial about his marriage:

Carver illustrates how menace can lurk in the calmest relationships for years before finally rising to the surface. More stable than any figure in this volume, Ralph is subjected to the most violent, explosive identity crisis of them all (perhaps because he, unlike others, is capable of comprehending his crisis as such). (23)

The attribute that separates Ralph from many of Carver's characters in other stories is Ralph's ability to balance his rage and disillusionment with some sense of rationalization and responsibility. What Ralph does not repudiate is his role in the breakdown of their marriage and his prior refusal to see Marion as a sensual creature rather than a domestic fixture of comfort and safety. The menace Nessel speaks of, however, is not what leads to his identity crisis, but rather a result of it.

In spite of a chaotic journey through the streets that follows, an exhilarating clarity and transient growth toward a new understanding of himself, and his wife, begins. Ewing Campbell asserts, “The crisis resolves itself finally to his amazement and with his apparent acceptance of the old Marion and the new Ralph Wyman...” (30). After wandering into a bar, he contemplates his situation (ironically, in a bathroom stall): “His life had changed, he was willing to understand. Were there other men, he wondered drunkenly, who could look at one event in their lives and perceive in it the tiny makings of the catastrophe that hereafter set their lives on a different course?” (Will You Please... 243) He is forced to examine everything about his life and marriage that he had, up to that point, blindly accepted as safe and comfortable. But this shock to his world, ironically, allows him to see that his existence had been a continuous state of denial. He assumes his old identity of “Jackson” during a card game--the alter-ego he had previously banished. By acknowledging the identity he had once repudiated in order to find a fixed achieved identity, he begins a new moratorium. His false idea of his marriage was in fact his identity foreclosure. When he arrives back home, they make love and he marvels at the “impossible changes he felt moving over him” (Will You Please... 251). Carver suggests the kinds of possibilities residing in the “impossible,” emphasizing the road to recovery is part of the journey, too. The new direction his (their) life would take, in spite of his bout with humility, would awaken all the passions, desires, and fears, Ralph had once put to sleep.

Several other forms of repudiation take shape in the earlier works, particularly with Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?; however, many stories have the negative

outcomes the anti-Carver critics often discuss. Regardless of this, failure is often what is needed to derive meaning and make the required changes for further identity development. In “They’re not your Husband,” Doreen, the protagonist waitress suffers the repudiation of her husband who wishes she would lose weight so she would become more appealing to strangers, and as a result, give her husband, Earl, a false sense of pride and identity. Although he disregards what is truly valuable in his wife, she continues to find worth in him. When another waitress looks at Earl and asks, “Who is this joker, anyway?” Doreen responds by saying, “He’s a salesman. He’s my husband” (30). By doing so she establishes his economic viability (even though he is unemployed) and his marital status (as it directly relates to her), noting the two things that Erik H. Erikson claimed were essential to identity achievement: love and work (Hoare 31). She in fact validates him while he minimizes her identity as his physical trophy to be objectified without internal substance. While she does not demonstrate an imminent move to moratorium, she does recognize the need for one, and seems painstakingly aware that her husband’s failure to fully cherish her inner beauty has placed their marriage and their identities in foreclosure.

In another story, the title “Nobody Said Anything” is itself suggestive of a refusal to recognize things of personal value, particularly other people the characters are intimate with. In this case, it is parental intimacy that falls short because of a couple’s refusal to acknowledge their son. On the other hand, the boy (the protagonist of the story) demonstrates the ability to recognize value where some would observe otherwise. After a long struggle to catch a fish, which ends with another boy forcing him to cut it in half, the boy shows the prize to his quarreling parents. When his father

orders the boy to “Take that goddamn thing out of here!” (Will You Please... 61), the boy obeys and then removes his fish from the creel and revels at his success, viewing it as a silvery jewel rather than something severed that will soon become rotten and wretched. The boy, in fact, presents the fish as a gift for his parents “as a kind of talisman around which to rebuild the family structure” (Meyer 44), so they will in turn stop arguing and recognize his accomplishment, and perhaps fuel pride within the household. Its metaphoric value in regard to repudiation is clear. The parents are so caught up in their battle that they fail to see substance in anything outside of themselves and they disregard the need for familial maintenance--unlike their young son who ironically has the wisdom to acknowledge. Arthur Saltzman notes the boy’s intuitive concern and the connection between identity and intimacy, claiming that the son has the “belief that somehow his victory will not only establish his manhood but also rescue his family from their malaise” (37). By maintaining intimacy with each other and with their children they can reap in the rewards, simply by acknowledging the positive aspects of life and their family--like seeing a severed fish as dinner or a source of pride for a young boy, rather than something readily set to be discarded as garbage. Unfortunately, they exemplify the latter. However, the boy is the source of light that Carver holds up as a hopeful sign that, in spite of his parents, achievement of self can be accomplished.

### C. Isolation in Carver’s Cathedral:

The second element of Distantation, Isolation, is abundant in Cathedral. This was the Carver work that welcomed a more optimistic view of the world in spite of the despair and confusion experienced by the characters. Critics have frequently

remarked that this work signifies his complete maturation as a writer. Kirk Nasset employs this isolation aspect for discussion in his article “Insularity and Self-Enlargement in Raymond Carver’s Cathedral” (from his book The Stories of Raymond Carver), claiming: “More strikingly in Cathedral than before, Carver’s figures seal themselves off from their worlds, walling out the threatening forces in their lives even as they wall themselves in, retreating destructively into the claustrophobic inner enclosures of the self” (51). These are all individuals with diffused or foreclosed identities who alienate themselves from others because of their inability to discover the nature of real intimacy. The identity diffused individuals tend to be the most isolated, and lack close intimate relationships, while the foreclosures are rigid and often demonstrate authoritarian personalities. Either way, both types of identity statuses experience a pseudo intimacy, having trouble with socialization, typically involving friendships that lack commitment, depth of emotional substance, and/or self-awareness (Gruenert 40). These kinds of individuals commonly form emotional barriers that disallow interpersonal connections, often without realizing their obstacles are self-constructed.

In “The Compartment,” Myers is an anti-social insomniac taken out of his insulated self-confinement, who is riding in a rail car traveling through Italy to France, but he refuses to extend himself beyond his emotional constraints. He is on his way to reacquaint himself with his estranged son who is studying at a University in Strasbourg. The two haven’t seen each other in eight years, since Myers had partially blamed the boy for the break-up of his marriage. Myers currently lives alone and does little socialization outside of his job. He feels fortunate for having the rail

compartment to himself, until a non-English speaking man enters the compartment and gets the sleep Myers longs for. Upon discovering the watch he had bought for his son is missing, he begins to secretly blame various passengers on the train, giving way to his resentful and accusatory nature.

Immediately, the symbolic representation of isolation is clear. He is literally in a foreign environment, unfamiliar with the language or culture, feeling frustrated and annoyed toward those who come within distance of his confines. Figuratively, the reader recognizes this is a man who has always been a foreigner, even in his own environment. He is withdrawn from compassion and empathy, disabled by bitterness, “threatened by the onslaught of overwhelming feelings” (Rubins 41), and unable to communicate--failing to comprehend others or himself. Developmental theorists Lesser, Marcia, and Orlofsky’s psychological profile of “an isolate” indicates a correlation with Myer’s neurosis:

The isolate subject is characterized by marked constriction of life space, with the absence of any enduring personal relationships.

Though he may have a few peer acquaintances he sees infrequently, rarely does he initiate social contacts... The anxiety accompanying close personal contact forces him to withdraw and isolate himself from others. He tends to be anxious and immature and generally lacking in assertiveness and social skills. He may present himself as bitter and mistrustful or smug and self-satisfied. (213)

Myers fits the isolate subject’s description well. He has physically and emotionally distanced himself from familial, social, and emotional contact, becoming a mere

observer in a landscape he will not, nor cannot participate in. He is awake in a world he would rather be asleep in, envying others for their slumber rather than admiring them for being awake.

After Myers leaves the station at Milan, he reads various guidebooks on Italy: “He read things he wished he’d read before he’d been to the place they were about. He discovered much that he should have seen and done” (Cathedral 48). Reading about the country after he leaves it demonstrates his self-imposed alienation, examining the value of people and places after one is removed from them, failing to appreciate and partake in its worth while he is there. But guidebooks are objective windows into worlds, whereas subjectivity resides in memory. When he reviews the life he once had and the son he once knew, he becomes stunted by the blame he places on the boy. In effect, he transfers the reproach he should assume for himself onto his son, then blames others for the time they lost--represented by his negative feelings toward those he thinks may have stolen the watch. He fails to take responsibility or show any remorse or regret. This stunts his emotional growth and his capacity for intimacy. He can only observe what he cannot achieve. As he looks out the window at the railway station he observes two men talking to a smiling woman with a baby in her arms. Then he sees a young couple embracing just before the young man leaves, later reaching out the window to kiss the fingers of his weeping lover. In response, “Myers looked away and clamped his teeth” (Cathedral 57). This voyeuristic indifference defines Myers. He is disassociated from human contact, viewing intimacy from a distance and refusing to be a part of it.

He finally decides not to see his son. However, he doesn't realize until it is too late that after he has wandered back to the train, "they must have uncoupled his car while the train was in the yard and attached another second-class car to the train" (Cathedral 58). He is on the wrong train, has no belongings, lacks any clear destination, and can only listen to the "jovial air" of others socially interacting. His isolation is further represented by his destitution. Finally, while others are comfortably interacting in the environment he refuses to be a part of, he sleeps--solidifying his metaphoric hibernation from society. The intimacy he lacks in his relationship with his son crosses over into his surroundings. His inability to properly communicate with others, maintaining a neutrality as it pertains to human concern, is the underlying point made in this story, adding to Myers' disconnectedness.

The next story, "Careful," takes place in the attic of a rental house, providing the isolated protagonist with the opportunity, like Myers, to observe the world from a distance--through a window. However, the character, Lloyd, is incapable of comprehending any value in what he sees. But Lloyd's problem is not that he is blind to the world, but deaf to it. His inability to comprehend what is being said is immediately suggested in the first sentence: "After a lot of talking--what his wife, Inez, called *assessment*--Lloyd moved out of the house and into his own place" (Cathedral 111). Once again, communication is the dividing factor between two parties, causing Distantation. Lloyd doesn't understand the value of *assessment*--weighing the factors of one's situation in order to find a possible solution. In fact, Lloyd's process of evaluation is questionable as well. When he walks through the landing in his building and sees his landlady lying on the floor he thinks she may be

sleeping. “Then it occurred to him she might be dead. But the TV was going, so he chose to think she was asleep” (Cathedral 111-12). Thus, Lloyd’s reality is based on what is most convenient for him to believe than what is actually so. He is deaf and dumb to the world which is figuratively solidified by a literal blockage of wax in his ear.

He’d awakened that morning and found that his ear had stopped up with wax. He couldn’t hear anything clearly, and he seemed to have lost his sense of balance, his equilibrium, in the process. For the last hour, he’d been on the sofa, working frustratedly on his ear, now and again slamming his head with his fist. (Cathedral 113)

Lloyd’s peculiar way of solving this symbolic failure to communicate, or hear what is being communicated, is a common negative reaction often associated with domestic arguments--violence. Because Lloyd’s wife is downstairs on the landing, the physical pummeling of his ear represents his reactionary response to the sound of her voice, which he hears as, “...the murmur of voices from a faraway crowd” (Cathedral 113).

Although there is no mention of physical abuse, the dysfunctional level of their relationship as demonstrated by his wife considering putting a hairpin in his ear to get out the wax is an indication that neither one of them recognizes the level of physical and emotional pain they have caused each other. While she does this out of concern, it is clear they both are failures at tending to the needs of the other. When she jokes about possibly using a nail file, a pencil, or even a screw driver, the reader momentarily half expects her to do it.

In fact, their relationship appears to be more paternal than a maternal one. Saltzman suggests this connection by referring to the title as it applies to the storyline: “‘Careful’ sounds like a plea of a nervous child or a parent’s gentle patronage” (124). But the irony of the title becomes evident since she assumes the role of the parent, although inept at nurturing and handling his physical ills; while he is the absent minded child who cannot truly fend for himself, demonstrating a complete absence of independence. In fact, it is his wife, Inez, who becomes dependent on his dependency, while he gains nothing, slipping deeper and deeper into a void of passivity as her departure leaves him more vulnerable than he already was. Psychotherapist Robert Firestone and Joyce Catlett discuss this shift of marital roles from parent to child in their book Fear of Intimacy:

...when an individual is under stress, there is a breakdown in the self-system. When the person is “not himself,” the self is fractured into parental and childlike behaviors that fit the model of transactional analysis. To the extent that individuals act childish or parental, they do real damage to their spouses and family members. (34)

The damage here, of course, is to Lloyd. When she leaves, the only way to numb his sense of loss (of her and of his fractured self) is to drink away his pain. However, she becomes addicted as well--to Lloyd’s vulnerability. While Lloyd has “been a tonic for her” she becomes a “low point for Lloyd” (Saltzman 123) a reminder that autonomy is far from his reaches.

While the story borderlines slapstick, Lloyd’s self-destructive detachment reaches extreme levels of distressing pathos. Carver himself, describes the story as

such: "...on the face of it a grim and desperate situation... (although) terribly funny in parts" (Conversations with Raymond Carver 131). Lloyd claims he drinks only champagne now to convince his wife and himself that he is not an alcoholic. But with repeated trips for another bottle, until he finally drinks from a glass filled with the baby oil his wife used to pour in his ear, the reader knows Lloyd is beyond saving. Adam Meyer notes Lloyd's evident destitution observing that "all the future seems to offer is the numbness of the bottle, and the added terror that his ear will clog up again and he won't have anyone there to unclog it" (135). The last image of Lloyd is pitiable:

He wasn't in the habit of drinking from the bottle, but it didn't seem that much out of the ordinary. He decided that even if he were to fall asleep sitting up on the sofa in the middle of the afternoon, it wouldn't be any more strange than somebody having to lie on his back for hours at a time. He lowered his head to peer out the window. Judging from the angle of sunlight, and the shadows that had entered the room, he guessed it was about three o'clock. (Cathedral 125)

Like the keeper of a light house, Lloyd is secluded from what he observes from the window. He is stranded in a fixed state of helplessness and buffoonery, and handicapped by his false sense of logic. His unawareness as to what time it is establishes Lloyd as someone who is displaced from the world of routine and schedules, devoid of truth based on definite images, and dazed by a world of angular shadows--left alone to box his own head for the disease of ill-clarity. But the saddest aspect of the withdrawn man in the window is his justification that nothing is peculiar

about it. His resistance to change and growth is muffled by his insistence that whatever choice he makes is as good as any.

“Preservation,” like “Careful,” takes place in a small apartment as well. While isolation is illustrated through communicative lapses in many of Carver’s stories, the isolation here is the result of lethargy and a lack of autonomous conviction by rendering an unemployed man stagnant on his couch, confining himself to a spot where the least amount of growth will transpire. However, his diffused state of making little attempt to forge his way back into the world of industry causes stress on his marriage and isolates him from his concerned wife, as well as the world outside of his confinement; her identity and future become as central to the story as his.

Sandy and her husband sat at the table and drank whiskey and ate chocolates. They talked about what he might do instead of putting roofs on new houses. But they couldn’t think of anything. “Something will turn up,” Sandy said. She wanted to be encouraging. But she was scared, too. Finally, he’d sleep on it. And he did. He made his bed on the sofa that night, and that’s where he’d slept every night since it happened. (Cathedral 35-36)

His passive role in his employment situation has immediate repercussions to their marriage. He has withdrawn into a world of passivity, becoming stalled at personal endeavors and displaced from intimacy with his wife. She knows that his current state will undoubtedly affect hers, and she begins to resent that which has come between them: “That goddamn sofa! As far as she was concerned, she didn’t even want to sit on it again. She couldn’t even imagine them ever having lain down there in the past to

make love” (Cathedral 37). His idle behavior has stifled their marriage. By diffusing his self-worth he has disseminated any intimate connection between the two of them. “In much the same way as achieving an identity makes intimate engagement with others possible, a sense of oneself as autonomous is a prerequisite for authentic intimacy” (Lesser, Marcia, and Orlofsky 218). By rendering himself incapacitated, he fails to find meaning and direction through personal commitments and goals, resulting in his identity crisis, which in effect produces negative results in regard to his commitment to his relationship with his wife.

In relation to matters of achieved identity as it pertains to intimacy, autonomy, initiative, and industry (healthy stages of Erikson’s developmental cycle) the adverse impact unemployment has on an individual has detrimental implications. It is not surprising that many of Carver’s characters are unemployed, which produces a feeling of incompleteness. Carver suggests this incompleteness in “Preservation” by withholding the husband’s name--which is common for Carver’s diffused characters. Sandy, on the other hand, is not in the same state, in spite of her husband’s predicament. She remains active in contributing to their marriage, making sure he reads all of the paper every morning, going to work herself, and cooking the thawing food from the broken refrigerator. However, it is her unspoken acknowledgement of her husband’s inactivity that suggests she may not remain in the relationship much longer. This becomes evident when she admits to being ashamed of him, and longs for the comfort of her parents. “She began missing her dad. She even missed her mom now, though the two of them used to argue all the time before she met her husband and began living with him” (Cathedral 45). What she lacks in marital intimacy, she

longs to replace with parental intimacy. In fact, she has become a maternal figure for him now, an enabler, who has helped insulate him from the outside world, but that displacement of roles has isolated her, as well--from her intimate needs.

The husband's failure to be active in his own growth process is what dismantles their intimate bond, as symbolically represented by his disregard for the marital bed, casting himself adrift on a couch surrounded by water from a broken refrigerator. Meyer offers insight into the figurative nature of the scene:

Here we see the husband literally afraid to get his feet wet. The sofa has become a kind of island to him, and he retreats to its security, fearing that if he ventures out he will only be swamped. As Sandy heads off to the auction at the end of the story, we sense that she is leaving him behind... His preservation, like that of the bog people, has prevented his salvation, his return to a viable existence, but Sandy is determined to avoid becoming equally petrified. (130-31)

Other symbolic references are given to suggest the isolation of the husband. The title itself suggests metaphoric irony, as Meyer notes in his book Raymond

Carver:

At first, we may think of preservation as being a positive sign, a kind of salvation. On the other hand, preservation also refers to keeping things intact, preserving them so that they do not change; this definition implies stasis rather than aspiration. In Carver's story, not surprisingly, it is the latter meaning of the word that prevails.

(129-30)

Another representation of stasis, rather than movement toward intimacy and active identity achievement, is the reference to a man preserved in a peat bog. After Sandy picks up the book her husband was reading, Mysteries of the Past, she learns about “a man who had been discovered after spending two thousand years in a peat bog in the Netherlands” (Cathedral 36). Her husband’s image comes to mind. The implication is twofold here. Not only is her husband a figurative example of a man who has regressed into a primitive state emotional of stagnancy, but in spite of the meaning the word preserved implies, he is not recognized as the man she once knew intimately. Imagining that they had ever had sex on the couch (his peat bog of choice) is too difficult for her to fathom. While he is preserved, their marriage has thawed; much like the broken refrigerator, the remnants of their marital sustenance will soon perish. Arthur M. Saltzman acknowledges the symbolic meaning, stating “When their freezer gives out, they are surrounded by perishables on all sides--a precise image of their own domestic entropy” (122). The disorder of the marriage is evident, so Sandy must leave and purchase a new fridge, fleeing the scene of marital discord in search of her own autonomy and a more functional domestic unit.

Although these examples of isolation offer little comfort by way of awareness of vision or personal growth, Cathedral’s “A Small Good Thing” illustrates how the confinement of tragedy and the lonely isolation a couple feels when paralyzed by the unfathomable death of a child can be assuaged by the least likely individual.

“A Small Good Thing” was initially published as “The Bath” in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. The first version was slimmed down to a

little over one third the length and ends ambiguously with an ominous phone-call that torments a couple whose son is in the hospital in a coma. It is a dark account of the lonely state of facing the possibility of an eminent loss. While Carver does not definitively end the boy's life in this first version, he does examine how individuals, although married, can feel isolated by a tragedy such as this.

In this version, a mother orders a birthday cake for her son Scotty. On the day of his birthday he is struck by a hit and run driver and the parents wait for news of his condition while the boy fights for his life in a hospital bed. When they fail to pick up the boy's cake, due to the chaos surrounding the day's traumatic incident, the telephone rings:

“Yes,” she said. “This is Mrs. Weiss. Is it about Scotty?”

she said.

“Scotty,” the voice said. “It is about Scotty,” the voice

said. “It has to do with Scotty, yes.” (What We Talk About... 56)

The ending lacks epiphany or definitive closure for the reader and Mrs. Weiss. The tragic event remains perpetually suspended on the caller's words. Although the boy's name is mentioned three times by the caller, he is still objectified as a loss. If it is the baker who is calling, a few pounds of flour topped with frosting appear to be more significant than the boy's life. He, like others in the world, have their own concerns, and the boy's existence is insubstantial. His name is reduced to letters scrawled on the top of a cake the boy will never see. Another potential caller could be the hospital. However, judging by the tone, and again, the repetition of the boy's name, the news cannot be good. The story ends with a mother about to deal with her greatest fear--her

boy's life being reduced to hopeless possibilities; the only options as to who is on the other end of the receiver (the baker or the hospital) negate the significance of his present and his future. Richard Eder describes the story as "a rending account of a disastrous misunderstanding--the destruction done by two mutually isolated machineries" (102). The isolation felt by the worried parents is heightened by their need to submerge themselves in the bath tub, to derive communion from the shock of their lives in imminent derailment. It is also expressed by their altering watch on the boy. Each takes turns staying by Scotty's bedside, while the other goes home to an empty house that lacks his presence.

However, the revised story, "A Small Good Thing," lacks the ambiguity and stark hopelessness the first version offers. Kathleen Westfall Shute notes the revision, stating, "this paradigm of hopeless resignation is abandoned as Carver not only confronts death... but goes on to record the life after, the agony and resulting growth of those who survive" (6). Even though the boy dies, the mother and the father are allowed to grieve the loss of their son and begin the first phase of healing that the first version denies them. The isolation aspect is here as well. There is a sense of communicative isolation that places the couple in a state of conjugal destitution. They are indeed together in this but feel disconnected from a world that cannot share in their anxiety and pain. The isolating factor is not what separates them from each other but from a society that has little understanding of their woes. This is demonstrated after the boy is taken for some more x-rays. The comatose boy and his parents ride down the hospital elevator shaft, as if they are plummeting into an abyss of

formidability toward an unrelenting metamorphosis they wish they could refuse to partake in:

In a little while, two orderlies came into the room with a gurney. They were black-haired, dark complexioned men in white uniforms, and they said a few words to each other in a foreign tongue as they unhooked the boy from the tube and moved him from his bed to the gurney. Then they wheeled him from the room. Howard and Ann got on the same elevator. Ann gazed at the child. She closed her eyes as the elevator began its descent. The orderlies stood at either end of the gurney without saying anything, though once one of the men made a comment to the other in their own language, and the other man nodded slowly in response. (Cathedral 69)

While others are in the elevator with the Weisses, they are alone in their descent. The emotions they feel cannot be communicated. They are detached from any dialogue that does not concern their son. This is illustrated, once again, by the implementation of foreign speakers. Like Myers in “The Compartment” they have become unwilling observers in an unfamiliar cubical, viewing their tragedy (with open and closed eyes) without the courtesy of windows and without the proper language to define the changes that are happening to their lives.

This sense of verbal isolation arises again as each waits for word of the boy’s fate, the inevitable conversation that will tell them they are no longer who they thought they were: parents. Their posterity will be abruptly stifled and they will be forced to Deal with the loss of their child and confront their loss of purpose--their

function as paternal caregivers. Their only solace is the connection they share with others in the hospital who wait like the Weisses, for conformation on the well-being of their children. Ann is drawn to these people in hopes of feeling less removed. She walks the hospital corridors searching for the elevator. Laurie Stone describes Carver's ability to illustrate the misery Ann feels as she waits for the news of her son: "With great power, he captures the terrible task of waiting, the attempt to gobble time in the small movements from window to bed, or from elevator to coffee machine" (55). When she comes upon a family whose son has been stabbed, a man with his wife and small daughter, she purges, "My son has been hit by a car" (Cathedral 74). She feels the need to express herself to those who may understand, to communicate to those whose lives have been ravaged like her own, but again, even though there is a shared tragedy, the dialogue falls short.

Ann looked at the girl again, who was still watching her, and at the older woman, who kept her head down, but whose eyes were closed. Ann saw the lips moving silently, making words. She had an urge to ask what those words were. She wanted to talk more with these people who were in the same kind of waiting she was in. She was afraid, and they were afraid. They had that in common. She would have liked to said something else about the accident, told them more about Scotty, that it happened on the day of his birthday, Monday, and that he was still unconscious. Yet she didn't know how to begin. She stood looking at them without saying anything more. (Cathedral 74)

Ann longs to communicate with those who may comprehend her pain but she cannot read the girls lips, nor can she conjure up the proper wording to express herself. Once again, feeling distanced from all of those who surround her she finds an elevator and descends, boxing herself in, keeping others at length while bracing for a fall.

But Ann is not alone in her emotional isolation. The factor which separates this story from many of the others in Cathedral is that Howard and Ann Weiss are truly intimate. Without real intimacy they would be forced to realize their personal destitution, their separation from that which had bound them--procreation. However, Scotty defines their parental identity not their marital identity. This couple is stronger than most, even in their most vulnerable moment. Like Nan, in "The Student's Wife" Ann prays for divine aid for what appears to be a possible break in their union, but in this instance Scotty is the identifying factor in the break. Without him they are lost, stripped of the roles that define them as parents. After Ann asks Howard to pray for Scotty, Howard assures her that he has prayed several times. She feels soothed by his invocation of divine intervention and reflects on the state of their relationship:

For the first time, she felt they were together in it, this trouble. She realized with a start that, until now, it had only been happening to her and Scotty. She had let Howard into it, though he was there and needed all along. She felt glad to be his wife. (Cathedral 68)

In a true intimate relationship priorities commonly define the strength of it. Often, an isolating factor is when two spouses share opposing concerns or initiate the destructive form of blame on each other. But the Weisses offer each other comfort and sanctuary. The isolating factor is not that which separates them from each other,

but from the rest of the world. “If in a sense the disruptive force that calamity clarifies, it also causes both Ann and her husband, hemmed in now by fear and dread, to project outward as they seek respite from confinement, worry insulating them as a security had before” (Nesset 63). While they wait together by the boy’s bedside they peer out the window, feeling detached from everything that does not involve their concern for their child, but they are unified in this detachment. “They both stared out at the parking lot. They didn’t say anything. But they seemed to feel each other’s insides now, as though the worry had made them transparent in a perfectly natural way” (Cathedral 70-71). The validation of their matrimonial union is evident. In this way they are bound tightly.

However, when they are given word of the boy’s unexpected death due to a hidden occlusion, they feel the isolation of two souls swept away in a wind of despair: “‘There, there,’ she said tenderly. ‘Howard, he’s gone. He’s gone and now we’ll have to get used to that. To being alone’”(Cathedral 82). Her reference of “being alone” means the two of them, together. The isolating factor is that they no longer share the role of parents. Usually subjects whom have achieved true intimacy are the least isolated and tend to have a great need for affiliation (Lesser, Marcia, and Orlofsky 218). The Weisses are isolated because of this need to be recognized by society as parents. While their bond is strong and their wholeness as individuals is clear in regard to their recognition of each other, they feel as if a limb has been ripped from them. They need validation that will bring them back to a world they feel displaced from.

At this point it is imperative to reiterate the importance of achieving all of the Eriksonian steps in order to successfully reach the next. The stage that follows Intimacy versus Distantiaion is Generativity versus Self-absorption. Because the Weisses have achieved intimacy in a healthy manner, it is their acquisition of Generativity that is threatened.

Generativity is primarily the interest in establishing and guiding the next generation, although there are people who, from misfortune or because of special and genuine gifts in other directions, do not apply this drive to offspring but to other forms of altruistic and creativity, which may absorb their mind or parental responsibility. (Erikson103)

The Generativity of the Weisses is threatened because of the death of their son. But Erikson points out that having offspring is not the only way to achieve it. The Weisses must realize that isolation will threaten their ability to pass on their wisdom and guidance to predecessors of the next generation unless they remove the developing emotional and social barriers that may arise from this traumatic life changing event. They must embrace the world outside, although they initially struggle with this. While the boy was still in a coma, Howard suggested one of them should go home to feed Slug but Ann tells him to call the neighbors, saying, "Anyone will feed a dog if you ask them to" (Cathedral 71). Here, they choose not to seek help from others, distancing themselves from social contact. Ann goes home to feed the dog herself.

When they finally approach the baker who has been leaving ominous phone messages asking if they have forgotten about Scotty (the cake, not the boy) they go to

the bakery at midnight out of rage--another barrier toward social intimacy. Ann becomes overpowered by the destructive emotion:

“You’re pretty smart for a baker,” she said. “Howard, this is the man who’s been calling us.” She clenched her fists. She stared at him fiercely. There was a deep burning inside her, an anger that made her feel larger than herself, larger than either of these men. (Cathedral 85)

She’s consumed with disillusionment, trying to explain why this tragedy would happen to them. Her identifying role as mother has been quashed, so when the baker lets them in the building her anger drives her to further insult the baker and his role in society:

“My son’s dead,” she said with a cold, even finality. “He was hit by a car Monday morning. We’ve been waiting with him until he died. But, of course, you couldn’t be expected to know that, could you? Bakers can’t know everything--can they, Mr. Baker? But he’s dead. He’s dead you bastard!” (Cathedral 86)

But as soon as the anger wells up in her, it shapes into despair and an overwhelming feeling of nausea overtakes her. Saltzman states: “Her debasement is complete, but Carver rescues her from the isolated defeat in which so many of his protagonists have been immured” (126). Out of guilt the baker insists they take a seat and then apologizes, explaining his own failure marked by isolation and a foreclosed identity:

“Let me say how sorry I am,” the baker said, putting his elbows on the table. “God alone knows how sorry. Listen to me. I’m just a baker. I don’t claim to be anything else. Maybe once, maybe years ago, I was a

different kind of human being. I've forgotten, I don't know for sure. But I'm not any longer... I don't have any children myself, so I can only imagine what you must be feeling. All I can say to you now is that I'm sorry. Forgive me, if you can," the baker said. "I'm not an evil man, I don't think. Not evil like you said on the phone. You got to understand what it comes down to is I don't know how to act anymore, it would seem." (Cathedral 87-88)

The baker's crisis of identity is established with his inability to recognize who he was, who he currently is, and how to act around others. He's failed at Generativity and has fallen into Self-absorption, working sixteen hours a day confined to his bakery, acknowledging that his only identifiable role (as a baker) does indeed perpetuate his self-imposed alienation. He questions Ann Weiss' characterization of him as a monster, but isn't quite sure whether he is or not.

Again, communicative isolation is pervasive in Carver's characterization of all three of these characters. The baker works alone and often at night while others are sleeping. His contact with the Weisses, up to that point, has been primarily through a telephone receiver, allowing a physical separation between the two parties and an ambiguity as to why he was calling, saying, "Have you forgotten about, Scotty" then hanging up (Cathedral 83). Not waiting for a response demonstrates an immaturity or lack of social skill the baker presents when communicating. He then becomes a mirror for the Weisses: the possibility of what they could be (if they allow the death of their son to sever their relationship with society), in effect, making them isolates as well. This regression from society will eventually lead to the type of pseudo-

intimacy the baker has with his occupation--creating bakery goods that will become stale after a few days; there will be nothing long standing to pass down except “a pervading sense of stagnation and interpersonal impoverishment” (Erikson 103). They will live out the rest of their lives in permanent disillusionment of identity.

However, the baker is given a chance at redemption, and in turn, will begin the healing process for Ann and Howard Weiss. These are two sets of individuals threatened by self-absorption and self-initiated social removal. Saltzman notes, “Their shared bond is inadequacy in the face of loss, joined by a need to be forgiven for that inadequacy” (126). Howard and Ann’s success at generativity is threatened by their inevitable ex-patriotism of their surroundings because of their response to the death of their son, while the baker’s self-absorption is perpetuated by his isolation and acceptance of an identity he minimizes as “just a baker.” However, he is allowed to guide them (as he would his own children if he had any) in their time of bereavement:

Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of a sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years. To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty. (Cathedral 88-89)

Hence, the baker reaches a temporary state of Generativity or epiphany which may result in a moratorium, while the Weisses are given the gift of communication, as Facknitz points out: “They must voice an unspeakable grief, and they accomplish this by listening to someone else’s suffering” (291). They are given wisdom through a

monologue of failed experience, and cinnamon roles--sustenance for weak and hungry souls. As a result, all three experience an epiphanic cleansing, as if the bread signifies a ritualistic communion. The true nature of intimacy is accomplished--intimacy without fallacy or the adornment of sexual desire. Nothing is denied here. All three of them reveal the gape of their open wounds, finding solace in the ability to reveal what they are feeling as well as discovering that each of them loses a little bit of themselves along the way. It is not their job to find it but to embrace the new role they must assume, no matter how painful.

#### D. Destruction in Carver's What We Talk About When We Talk About Love

The third aspect of the Intimacy stage, Destruction, is the element that incites the common and often overindulged discussions of menace in Carver's stories. Infidelity, violence, and alcoholism are common forces of destruction that divide intimate unions and perpetuate identity diffusion and foreclosure. Infidelity, of course, is abundant in these stories and could be perceived as an annihilation of the marital bond, which in effect, halts the development of the intimacy stage. Since much of who we think we are is based on how and who we love, the deliberate sabotage of a marriage, often induced by infidelity, can be viewed as an act of self-destruction, or on the contrary, as a flight of liberation. Alcoholism is common in Raymond Carver's stories as well, particularly because of his own addiction, having been hospitalized for acute alcoholism four times between 1976 and 1977 (Meyer 11). Alcoholism is the destructive force that halts any kind of active search for identity achievement. It is an act of self-denunciation and interpersonal abandonment: a false attempt at healing emotional scars, which in effect, creates gaping wounds and

social boundaries--again demonstrating how repudiation and isolation work within the framework as well. Violence, in regard to intimate relationships, is often the result of communicative failure between partners. When modes of verbal communication break down, the spouse, usually the male, attempts to maintain control by asserting violent behavior. While the destruction is external and literal, the internal damage severs the emotional marital bond. In his article "Domestic Violence: Perspectives on the Male Batterer" Kevin Barry explains some possible motivating factors for the violence, particularly as it pertains to alcoholics:

Their marital conflict style and alcohol consumption moderate their expression of hostility and the power inequality in the relationship. Violent men may evidence more insecure, preoccupied, and disorganized attachment with anxiety about abandonment, fear of closeness, and preoccupation with their wives... The violent reaction may be triggered by the threatened loss of a relationship, rejection by a wife, or feelings of jealousy. (64)

This "disorganized attachment with anxiety about abandonment" is key in most of the stories in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. The title itself is ironic in the sense that the failure to properly communicate this anxiety and fear of divorce or estrangement often breeds a violent reaction resulting from the absence of a healthy dialogue. Bill Mullen discusses the failure to communicate in Carver's What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, by emphasizing the pared down use of language in the book (5). The omission of words in the book generates the growing tension and creates an atmosphere for violent plot lines: talking out the

problem no longer functions as a remedy; violence takes its place out of desperation, and perpetuates the inability to solve problems. These characters respond violently because they have failed to find appropriate solutions. Since communication is a key element of intimacy, violence then becomes its antithesis, further distancing the individual from his partner, community, and the pursuit of a stable identity.

Some explicit acts of violence can be seen in the stories “Tell the Women We’re Going” and “Popular Mechanics.” Critic Robert Towers refers to them both as having outcomes of “gratuitous cruelty” (37), since the aspects of epiphany found in other Carver collections are almost non-existent in these two stories, having been replaced by shock value.

“Tell the Women We’re Going” provides less than a two dimensional characterization of two friends, Jerry and Bill, whose friendship is chronicled from grade school to the present. Bill seems less self-assured than Jerry and appears to follow Jerry’s lead in spite of his own needs. There is little indication that Jerry is sadistically compelled to behaviors of violence until the very end of the story when the men attempt to seduce two young ladies and follow them into an outcrop off the side of a mountain road, leading up to the violent climax when, as a shock to Bill, Jerry bludgeons the girls to death with a rock. Initially, Jerry is described as a blue collar, beer drinking, “happy father of two kids” with a simple but nice house (What We Talk About... 59). He eventually becomes belligerent when two girls on bicycles ignore his drive-by sexual advances, although this belligerence is not an uncommon trait for a character in Carver’s America. However, the abrupt and shocking brutality of it all lends very little to literary brilliance. Robert Houston criticizes Carver for this

surprise saying the writer, “resorts to a violence he hasn’t earned for an ending” (23). Up to that point, Jerry covets--that’s all we know. Jerry and Bill bought a car together --but Jerry does the driving in this story. Bill dated a girl that Jerry would later marry while Bill plays the role of side-kick observer, admiring Jerry’s very modest acquisitions. Although Jerry appears to be a simple home town boy with simple needs, he turns out to be an individual with identity foreclosure and psychotic tendencies. His disregard of rules and the observers of his immature plights of fancy may foreshadow repressed anxiety, but none as violent as the outcome.

Bill is the saving grace here. Carver characterizes him as a follower who finally witnesses his hero’s bizarre psychosis. Perhaps the value of the story can be found in Bill’s final awareness that he had been falsely projecting himself into Jerry. He wanted so much to be like Jerry that his own identity remained submerged in a false ideal, living vicariously through Jerry. Jerry’s breakdown is what finally separates the two men. Bill is as shocked as the reader. “He never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock” (What We Talk About... 30). His reaction becomes an awakening, an understanding that he is not like Jerry.

In his book Social and Personality Development: Infancy Through Adolescence (1983) W. Damon reiterates child developmental expert James Mark Baldwin’s belief that “communion” or the socialization of an individual centering on the need to feel connected to others is an important aspect of discovering personal identity or “individuation”; however, the two often create false opposition:

There is a creative tension between the two (communion and individuation) a dialectical interplay between the needs of the

individual to maintain relations with others and the needs of the individual to construct a separate self. The individual can only construct the self in the context of relations with others, but at the same time, the individual must step beyond the confines of those relations and forge a unique destiny. (5)

Bill's identity was so dependent on Jerry that Bill lost perception of who he, himself, really was. In order to break free of his foreclosure Bill must break free of Jerry. His discovery of Jerry's sociopathic characteristics allows him to understand the false intimacy between he and Jerry that once defined Bill. Bill can now forge his own identity--although that is little consolation to the violently murdered victims of Jerry.

Another story of false intimacy ending climactically in violence is "Popular Mechanics". The inability for an estranged couple to decide immediate custody of their infant leads to a violent end for the baby. Affable verbal communication has failed them, so they struggle over the baby, tugging at it from both ends until the father pulls back very hard and "in this manner, the issue was decided" (What We Talk About... 125). Although the baby's fate is ambiguous, the destructive nature of separation is evident. Reason gives way to vindication. Ownership and victory supercede understanding when the baby is referred to as "it" by both parents and devalued as a consolation prize, rather than being seen as a familial product of love and obligation. The violent scene literally illustrates how children of divorce can be scarred by and torn between both parents, giving credence to a deeper, figurative meaning that suggests the emotional damage that results as well. The irrational behavior of the parents has long term repercussions on the children. A further analysis

of the struggle, in terms of Distantation, may suggest their need to maintain their parental identity due to the loss of their spousal identity, even though the action is ironically non-paternal. The child's welfare comes second to becoming victorious over the other.

In an article in The Journal of Pastoral Counseling, Ginnie Bailey acknowledges psychotherapists Greenberg and Safran's claim that the inability for couples to properly release buried emotions and provide effective feedback to the other spouse will eventually lead to separation from their social environment; Greenberg and Safran's argument is "organisms that ignore their own effective feedback are not well suited to behave adaptively" (88). A negative result can lead to violence toward others and the self, including a rejection of intimacy from where they once sought it. Carver's abused baby is the result of communicative failure and the need to destroy that which threatens one's identity. Carver interviewer Francesco Durante regards this auxiliary dialogue (in the form of violence) as "a dialogue that cuts off the breath, even in the banality of the situation" (Conversations with Raymond Carver 194). Although the destruction of the parents is forced upon the infant, it is done in retaliation against each other.

In "A Serious Talk," an imminent divorce, again, leads to acts of violence. Burt, a jilted husband presses the limits with several violent acts against his estranged wife. Infidelity works its way in this story as well, as prior betrayal by the wife incites the husband into a frenzy of damaging ruination. Showing up at her house the day after Christmas, he surveys the damaged dessert on the driveway, recalling the events that took place the night before:

A small wax and sawdust log burned on the grate. A carton of five more sat ready on the hearth. He got up from the sofa and put them all in the fireplace. He watched until they flamed. Then he finished his soda and made for the patio door. On the way, he saw the pies lined up on the sideboard. He stacked them in his arms, all six, one for every ten times she had ever betrayed him. (What We Talk About... 106 – 07)

Burt's anger is preceded by a feeling of abandonment. His inability to deal with his separation and loss of marital identity, produces anger and a destructive need to smash the pies on the driveway and literally burn everything that represents his prior domesticity. When he returns out of guilt the next day, perhaps still clinging to the false assumption that his marriage can be mended, her disdain for him and his violent actions precipitates another furry filled episode. When she tells him he must go soon because she is going to meet someone and then proceeds to take a private phone-call in her bedroom (a further indication that his role as husband is replaced by someone else) he feels victimized and lashes out by severing the telephone chord and hiding the phone. His refusal to allow her to be the initiator of their separation, leads him to a violent response that offers him a false sense of power over their break up, his way of claiming responsibility for his severed marriage. But in doing so, he continues to distance himself from her and any possible growth he may later acquire. He further incurs his own diffusion.

The title "A Serious Talk," offers irony: productive dialogue is replaced by acts of physical destruction. The serious talk they were to have becomes an

embittered verbal assault accompanied by physical expression in the form of the husband's rage. Meredith Marsh notes the ineffective nature of the dialogue:

...(they) manage to say a great deal in the language of infidelity and violent gestures without ever settling down to the discussion they keep planning. They do exchange one word that means something, however. After they have battled so furiously that it seems little of value can be left unsmashed, the husband selects a particular ashtray to throw, and his wife stops him merely by asserting that it is theirs. Not hers alone, whatever its legal status, but theirs: the plural pronoun rivets each of them. Still, it fails to fuse them together as the husband had hoped. (38)

Words no longer have substance to Burt. The wife's suggestion that they are still connected somehow, even though what connects them is an inanimate object, does not sooth his frustration. He knows it is only something of theirs that they will soon fight over in court. He refutes the connection of the ashtray by invalidating its purpose: "He'd tell her the goddamn ashtray was a goddamn dish..." (What We Talk About..., 113). But he is still disillusioned, believing he can tell her anything and find resolve. His loss of identity through his imminent divorce is further extenuated by his destructive reactions that continue to distance himself from his wife and his prior self-image. In effect, Burt's violent behavior is an act of bereavement for his divorce, rejecting their separation by violating the things that once represented their union. But the result is fruitless. He falls deeper into a void of identity diffusion. Judith Viorst in her book Necessary Losses claims that "the loss of a mate with whom we have shared

a history shatters the former conditions of our lives” (291). As for Burt, his dejection and denial cause him to shatter all the remnants of his past life that continually remind him of his failure and his loss of self.

While the destructive forces of violence are evident throughout What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, the story “I Could See The Smallest Things” emphasizes this motif of alcoholism, not only by showing its negative impact on the marriage between the narrator (Nancy) and her husband (Cliff) but also by illustrating the abatement of the relationship between Cliff and his neighbor, Sam. Although Cliff is passed out in a drunken stupor when the story begins, the effects of his destructive behavior is evidenced by his wife’s insomniac perspective and his neighbor’s remorse of their estrangement.

As Nancy is drawn from her bed to her window she looks out at the backyard to see the gate to her fence standing wide open. She finally goes outside to discover her neighbor Sam Layton sprinkling poison powder on the nocturnal slugs who are eating tiny holes in his rosebushes. “‘They’re taking over,’ he said” (What We Talk About... 34). We soon discover there is a rift between Sam and Cliff. Double fences built by both men to wall out the other, signify the seriousness of their quarrel, although Sam shows remorse:

Sam said, “Sometimes I’m out here after the slugs, I’ll look over in your direction.” He said, “I wish me and Cliff was friends again. Look there now,” he said, and drew a sharp breath. “There’s one there. See him? Right there where my light is.”... Then Sam was over it with his can of powder, sprinkling the powder down. (What We Talk About...

34-35)

Soon Nancy is back inside, laying next to Cliff, listening to the phlegm dribbling down Cliff's throat to his chest. She remembers the powder Sam Layton was pouring on the slugs. Then she says, "I thought for a minute of the world outside my house, and then didn't have anymore thoughts except the thought that I had to hurry up and sleep" (What We Talk About... 36). She mourns the life she does not have and wishes to escape her miserable existence through slumber but cannot.

The destructive forces at work here are multiple. The double fences work less as an insulating factor and become a severing tool of social annihilation. The building of the structures eradicates what is within the fence as well as what it outside of the fence. The irony is that what has been built around the yard actually dismantles the friendship between the two men, and Nancy is confined by her husband's alcoholism and feudal retaliatory response to Sam. She is imprisoned by her husband's failure to be intimate and socially apt. The open gate is like a dare for Nancy to leave so she can save herself, but she fails to do so. Sam's attack on the slugs can also be viewed as an ironic symbol. His destructive behavior is actually an active response to self-preservation, an eradication of that which poses a threat to his desired identity. The rosebushes represent Sam's domestic possibilities of bliss, the hope for well being. Fontana suggests, "The slugs eating away at Sam's rosebushes, have come to externalize for him his own fears of aging and loneliness" (448). Just like putting up a fence to guard against an unhealthy, alcoholic relationship with Cliff, Sam must destroy everything (including the slugs) that harms his idea of emotional well-being.

While, Sam keeps his house (or life) in order, literally by destroying that which threatens the beauty of his home, he also maintains his domestic tranquility by abstaining from alcohol. He tells Nancy, “I quit, you know... had to. For a while I didn’t know up from down. We still keep it around the house, but I don’t have much to do with it anymore” (What We Talk About... 37). He is taking measures to recreate his self-image and Nancy must learn from Sam by abstaining from the things that harm her as well--like Cliff. Fontana expands on this eventful moment: “This nocturnal encounter under a full moon infects Nancy with Sam’s own obsession” (Fontana 448-49). She is at a crossroads.

Having perceived this new image of Cliff as a slug, Nancy seems ready to break with him entirely. Nevertheless, she cannot bring herself to take decisive action... She senses the abyss is at hand, as is so often the case in carver country, but she decides to pretend it doesn’t exist. (Meyer 96)

Her vision of pouring poison down Cliff’s throat may appear to be a wishful act of violence on Cliff but actually has other implications: Cliff has been poisoning himself with alcohol, reducing himself to a bloodsucking slug; Sam’s eradication of the slugs offers a symbolic connection between Sam and Cliff’s severed relationship, which in turn has added additional strain to Nancy’s marriage. The social ineptness of Cliff (walling out the world while he sleeps in an alcoholic coma) has devalued her role in society. Since Sam has taken steps for renewal, removing that which feeds upon his domiciliary atmosphere, Nancy too fantasizes about taking similar steps. Either way, their intimacy is shattered and her only hope for survival is to acknowledge her

symbolic epiphany, which she rejects. She has become so isolated that she ignores her own value of insight, therefore destroying her chances of self-preservation. She remains steeped in her foreclosed marriage and existence.

There are several other examples of alcohol deteriorating the base of the family structure in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. In the short three and a half page story, “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fix it,” an alcoholic recalls memories of his dysfunctional alcohol induced family. His wife had an affair with a man she met at Alcoholics Anonymous, his sixty five year old mother demonstrates promiscuous behavior, and his daughter is basically apathetic toward them all. Ross, the narrator, appears to be content with his current status although the reader is given little to believe any growth is possible.

“One More Thing” is another brief story that demonstrates the damage alcohol has on the family unit. The first line of the story immediately indicates Distantation and familial deterioration caused by alcoholism: “L.D.’s wife, Maxine, told him to get out the night she came home from work and found L.D, drunk again and being abusive to Rae, their fifteen year old” (What We Talk About... 155). All the elements of marital decay are here: alcoholism, child abuse, and imminent estrangement. There is not much hope for this family. The rest of the story essentially focuses on L.D.’s verbal abuse toward his daughter and his wife while he packs his bags to leave; although, he does physically intimidate them as well, stepping toward them with formidable posturing and lunging a pickle jar through the window. Like “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit,” the rule of thumb in Carver’s shorter works appear to be: the shorter

the story, the less a chance of a character reaching an epiphany. However, as Meyer points out, L.D. is not entirely unsympathetic:

...L.D. is in many ways a worthless drunk who brings nothing to the family and takes much away from it--yet Carver also manages to align our sympathies with L.D. We see the fears and insecurities that have led him to this position, and we feel for him in his effort to maintain what little stability he knows, however doomed that effort may be. (112)

L.D.'s unsuccessful attempt at self-discovery has turned him into an alcoholic, which in turn has distanced himself from his wife and daughter, although the verbal insults work from both sides--particularly regarding the disrespect Rae shows her father and his minimal intellect. However, one must assume that alcoholics will breed this type of discontent from their children. The psychological and physical abuse the family of an alcoholic endures often results in unhealthy and disruptive responses from those family members. In an article discussing family dysfunction and juvenile delinquency resulting from having alcoholic parents, Edward L. Leoni and Johnny G. McGaha write:

Some family members simply give up and withdraw, some act out, some try to normalize and control the situation by overachievement, and others assume roles that seem to bring relief to the family system. In the end, all family members experience extreme difficulty and suffer significant personal losses. The dynamics of progressive alcoholism are disruptive and the family and the individual reactions

are usually “crisis state” or “survival adaptations”. (477)

Therefore, Maxine and Rae are in a crisis state, attempting to survive L.D. and his alcoholic rampages. Rae verbally acts out against her father and has withdrawn from school, while Maxine is finally emotionally withdrawing from L.D.. These survival adaptations may have negative results as Distantation often does, but repudiating, isolating, and destroying that which threatens one’s identity (like an alcoholic father) is often a good thing. Maxine tells L.D. “If it’s a nuthouse, then that’s what you made it.” Indeed, L.D. is the catalyst of the household trouble, therefore leading to Maxine’s only practical step: to remove the trouble by eliminating him from their home. While L.D.’s fate is hopeless, Maxine can break the chains of foreclosure by removing that which threatens a new moratorium for a new identity.

Distantation can be used as a method to break away from intimate relationships that stunt identity growth or it can stifle an individual’s attempt at intimacy, thus halting any progression toward identity achievement. In Carver’s stories we witness characters who repudiate people and things that are needed for their emotional advancement, in addition to repudiating barriers that once constrained them in a constant state of identity diffusion or foreclosure. However, characters who isolate themselves become observers who witness the world with fogged vision, which is further complicated by the inability to communicate. Destruction is also an example of poor communication but is a result of self-loathing as well, which commonly leads to infidelity, alcoholism, and violence. Once these characters obtain true intimacy by distancing themselves from emotionally harmful elements and

## Chapter Four: Narrative Moratorium: Creating Identity Through the Telling

Psychologist Donald Polkinghorne asserts that we “achieve our personal identities and self concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story” (150). Many psychologists believe that the process of telling or retelling the story of one’s life is in fact part of the process of achieving identity. Narrative methodologist Catherine Kohler-Riessman describes the importance of narrative analysis as it applies to psychological case-work:

Human agency and imagination determine what gets included and excluded in narrativization, how events are plotted, and what they are supposed to mean. Individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives. (2)

This same approach for understanding the individual’s search for identity in psychology can be applied to the stories of Raymond Carver, particularly with his first person narratives. These narratives come from characters whose marriages and relationships lack intimacy. They are either constrained to relationships founded by values or ideals they blindly accepted early on in life (identity foreclosure), or they are experiencing diffusion, with no clear identity--and, until recently, have made no attempt to discover their true identity. The process of telling their own life stories allow the characters to identify who they really are and where they are going; in effect, they experience an identity moratorium through narrative. In his book, Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity (1988) Dan P. McAdams, psychological expert on the study of personology, suggests:

The story is the answer to the questions, “Who am I,” and “How do I fit in?”... The problem of identity is the problem of arriving at a life story that makes sense--provides unity and purpose--within a socio-historical matrix that embodies a much larger story. A person’s world establishes parameters for life stories. In this way identity is truly psychosocial: The life story is a joint product of person and environment. (18)

This narrative, often unreliable on the surface, demonstrates a character’s awareness of himself and his environment whether it is delusional or practical. How one views his environment and his relationships leads to discovery of oneself. Often Carver characters establish foreclosure and diffusion through narrative, although, commonly these narrators reach an epiphanic understanding which allows them to break free of the social and marital bonds that once stabilized their personal growth and it forces them to participate actively in identity achievement. This “narrative moratorium,” if you will, offers the reader insight into the character’s true identity as well as the character himself.

As simple and imperceptive as many of Carver’s narrators seem, his use of unreliable and “naïve” first person narrators offer the possibility of keen characterizations that may have otherwise been slighted by the ambiguities and lack of details. These characters re-examine their views of themselves, and in turn, better understand the story of their life by sharing the details of it. Literary critic Nelson Hathcock discusses the power of Carver characters to reconstruct their lives through first person narrative language:

...these narrators show a common interest in the way they tell their stories. The stories themselves dramatize the characters incipient awareness of their own authority: the control of their own language. This act of assertion reveals their ability to read, at last, the texts of their own lives... they are granted a new vision of their lives and, in the process, a re-vision of meaning. (31)

In his highly regarded masterpiece, "Cathedral," from the collection of the same title, Carver demonstrates this unreliability by giving us a narrator whose personality is crude, insensitive, and bigoted on the surface. But it is his crude, simple minded nature that makes him vulnerable, and it is that vulnerability which allows him to experience enlightenment, discovering a profound truth about himself that opens a door for maturity in regard to his previously foreclosed identity. Aspects of this vulnerability can be seen in two parts: the central impediment and the impairment. The central impediment, when dealing with disillusioned and irrational individuals, is the obstacle and the impairment is the mode of dysfunction (Lifton 66). In the narrator's case, his obstacle is his resistance to the new information that will force him to examine a foreclosed set of ideals, which is the impairment that he had previously blindly accepted and never questioned. The irony, of course, is that the catalyst for his ability to see the world and himself with new eyes is a blind man who comes to visit for the night. In effect, his internal vision spawns from a man who is externally sightless.

The fact that the first person narrator is unnamed should not be lost on the reader. One cannot name what cannot be defined. When the narrator begins his story,

he is incomplete, weighed down by the baggage of his simple minded judgments about life. His ideas of blindness, prior to meeting his wife's blind friend Robert, were based on stereotypical misconceptions. This, in turn, impairs his own vision, which is when his discomfort begins:

I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to. (Where I'm Calling From 356)

However, when Robert arrives, the narrator soon discovers that some preconceived notions he had about blind men are not true:

He wore brown slacks, brown shoes, a light-brown shirt, a tie, a sports coat. Spiffy. He also had this full beard. But he didn't use a cane and he didn't wear dark glasses. I always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind. Fact was, I wished he had a pair. At first glance, his eyes were like anyone else's eyes. But if you looked close, there was something different about them. (Cathedral 209)

The significance of this description is to demonstrate the narrator's false belief system and his fear of discovering alternative views. As Ewing Campbell states, this adult narrator "is no better informed than the adolescent narrator who must be disabused of the mistaken notion about the world" (64). By examining Robert with his wife, he is also allowed to observe her from a new perspective, which in turn, allows him to examine himself and how he treats her. But he fails to appropriately read it. His

retelling of his wife's past demonstrates his comprehension of the surface details of her life, although he cannot explicate the substance of it:

That summer in Seattle she had needed a job. She didn't have any money. The man she was going to marry at the end of the summer was in officer's school. He didn't have any money, either. But she was in love with the guy, and he was in love with her, etc. She'd read something in the paper: HELP WANTED-Reading to a blind man, and a telephone number...They'd become good friends, my wife and the blind man. How do I know these things? She told me. (Cathedral 215-16)

Thus, his inability to see worth or value in her past, indicates his false sense of awareness of her present worth, which implicates his knowledge of their relationship, which in turn, places his self knowledge in question. He only knows the exterior aspects of her life because she tells him. He cannot sense her friendship with Robert. He must be told of it. His use of the word "ect" is an additional indication of his intuitive sense, as well as his unwillingness to extract emotional details about her. Not knowing what he loves is the equivalent to the diffused state of not knowing himself.

Additionally, his indifferent retelling of her attempted suicide with pills, and his lack of understanding regarding her need to purge or emote through recording her stories on tapes or writing poetry indicates his ignorance to see the growth that comes from telling one's own story or talking it out:

But instead of dying, she got sick. She threw up. Her officer--why should he have a name? He was a childhood sweetheart, and what

more does he want?--came home from somewhere, found her, and called the ambulance. In time, she put it all on tape and sent the tape to the blind man. Over the years, she put all kinds of stuff on tapes and sent the tapes off lickety-split. Next to writing a poem every year, I think it was her chief means of recreation. (Cathedral 211)

However, his narrative, like his wife's poetry and tape recordings, does slowly begin to evoke emotional growth. When he retells the story of Robert's wife dying of cancer, he begins to show sympathy, rather than contempt for Robert. He also allows himself to empathize with the wife, imagining how horrible it would be to be in love with a man who could never see what she looked like or "read the expression on her face" (Cathedral 213). "By revising the story provided by his wife," Nelson Hathcock states, "the speaker manages his own comprehension and through it feels the pangs of sympathy, none of which pervade his earlier account of his wife's attempted suicide" (37). However, he still lacks the ability to see the implicit connection that he, the narrator, is in fact, the blind man who never truly saw his wife for what she truly was. But his awareness grows when he witnesses his wife's jovial interaction with Robert. "I saw my wife laughing as she parked the car. I saw her get out of the car and shut the door. She was still wearing a smile. Just amazing" (Cathedral 214). There soon evolves a greater awareness which at first appears to only solidify his jealousy of Robert, but also signifies regret and longing:

They talked of things that happened to them--to them!--these past ten years. I waited in vain to hear my name on my sweet wife's lips: "And then my dear husband came into my life"--something like that. But I

had heard nothing of the sort. More talk of Robert. (Cathedral 218)

Nesset suggests a relationship between Robert's sense of identity and his desire to be regarded fondly (by name) by his wife:

...this man's sense of a secure identity depends upon his bond with a female, a bond he seems to need to see perpetually reinforced--though --perturbed by his insensitivity, his wife isn't about to give him the reinforcement he craves... His muddled search for self, we guess, involves a continual gauging and protecting of the autocratic status of his name. (67)

Thus, the aspect of being a nameless narrator, once again, is fortified by his need to hear his wife speak his name. We see that it is only through her that he can obtain his identity. We assume that once real intimacy is achieved, he may indeed hear her speak his name to Robert, thus solidifying a specific identity. It is also significant that Robert refers to the narrator as "Bub," a generic term that generalizes him as an acquaintance to Robert, and not only disassociates him from the closeness shared by Robert and his wife, but also infers the need for him to forge a closer union with Robert, which will enhance his union with his wife.

However, it isn't long until the narrator begins to feel comfortable around the blind man. They smoke pot together and watch a television documentary on cathedrals. When Robert asks the narrator to describe a cathedral to him, the narrator is at a loss. An interesting note is that the documentary is being narrated--which gives Robert superficial details about cathedrals like how long they took to be built and how generations of men worked on them, never to see them completed--but Robert

still cannot visualize the full physical essence of a cathedral. The lesson, of course, is that one has to look beyond the narrative and experience--that which cannot be said--which is something the reader is forced to do in regard to this first person narrator.

Like a psychologist doing a narrative analysis on a subject, the reader must follow the same interpretive example. The Personal Narratives Group discuss this difficulty in extracting truth from the interpretation of a narrative:

Unlike the truth of the scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them. Sometimes the truths we see in personal narratives jar us from our complacent security as interpreters “outside” the story and make us aware that our own place in the world plays a part in our interpretation and shapes the meanings we derive from them. (261)

Like the reader in regard to the narrator’s story in “Cathedral,” the narrator must conceptualize cathedrals in a way he can relate to his own life. In order to convey meaning he must interpret and understand the meaning of cathedrals. But he cannot interpret what has been conveyed objectively. He must perceive them subjectively before he can interpret meaning and then share his knowledge of them. Fortunately, Robert asks the narrator to hold his hand while they draw one together. This gives credence to the notion that mere words cannot get true meanings across. His wife’s narratives (on the tapes and in her poems) failed to reach her husband because he avoided placing an emotional stake in her past, and he was unable to understand his

own place in the world as well as in her life; perhaps finding those truths threatening to his self-conception. But Robert is a part of her past as well, and once he allows himself to experience Robert, he can then, in turn, indulge in that which is sacred to his wife. Carver's second wife and author, Tess Gallagher, notes the importance of this connection and the masterful way Carver displays it: "He caused the blind man's hand to rest on top of the narrator's, thereby placing the narrator in the position of making the recognitions... and also increasing the intimacy between the characters" (37). Here, another story is told, without words. It is a kinesthetic narration, however, one that asserts that power is given to each man individually when the two work together without prejudice.

The cathedral, of course, is symbolic of that which is sacred but cannot be truly explained unless it is experienced. By creating a cathedral together, they develop an emotional and physical understanding of building something sacred collectively, while sharing the strength of each man with the other. The result is a spiritual communion between the two men. "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything. 'It's really something,' I said" (Cathedral 228). The narrator's vision is turned inward. While he shares his outer sight with Robert, Robert shares his inner vision with the narrator--demonstrating what it is like to open his heart to another human being, unconditionally.

The husband reaches an emotional epiphany with Robert, but even more so, because he is allowed to tell his story through narrative, both verbally and kinesthetically. His experience is an unequivocal moment of clarity which marks the beginning of his moratorium from a previously foreclosed identity. But the revelation

is a shared one. Facknitz discusses this dual enlightenment between the two men in his essay “‘The Calm,’ ‘A Small Good Thing,’ and ‘Cathedral’: Raymond Carver and the Rediscovery of Human Worth”:

The cathedral, of course, is the space that does not limit, and his perception of *something*--objective, substantial, meaningful--that cannot be seen with ordinary sight depends on his having to perceive as another perceives. In fictional terms, he learns to shift point of view. In emotional terms, he learns to feel empathy. In the moment when the blind man and the narrator share an identical perception of spiritual space, the narrator's sense of enclosure--of being confined by his own house and circumstances--vanishes as if by an act of grace, or a very large spiritual reward for a virtually insignificant gesture. (295)

Thus, the narrator achieves intimacy and discovers a new form of identity, at the same time, breaking free of his false ideological sanctions. This gives credence to the argument that identity achievement must not necessarily precede intimacy. In fact, the two are achieved simultaneously. The narrator's shared understanding of the perception of a cathedral, creates a new perception of himself. He is freed from identity foreclosure at the same time he experiences social intimacy. The convergence of what W. Damon calls the individual dynamic and the social dynamic corroborates this belief that identity achievement and intimacy go hand in hand rather than chronologically; while the individual dynamic need is to reach self individuation by formulating a unique sense of self, the social dynamic need is to “enhance one's sense of belonging and mattering to significant others” in addition to centering on

communion and connectedness in a social context (Adams 5). Damon believes the two are interconnected, proposing that individuation (or healthy identity achievement) requires both the need to feel like a unique individual and obtain and secure a sense of social belonging (Adams 4). This establishes the importance of the communal epiphany in “Cathedral.” The narrator finds both intimacy and identity at the same time, being able to discover a spiritual enlightenment of self in the cathedral he has created with Robert.

What makes this narrator’s revelation so believable is the honesty that Carver conveys. By inadvertently revealing so many personal faults through his first person narration, the reader accepts this epiphany as genuine. Therefore, enhancing the integrity of the story as well as the narrator.

Another narrative technique used by Carver that highlights identity foreclosure leading to an eventual moratorium is what Carver interviewer Geoffrey Wolff calls “indirection of narrative” (Halpert 124), also referred to as the “aleatory narrative method” by Ernest Fontana (449). This unique style creates a narrator whose lack of direction in anecdote is as equally confused with the uncertain direction of his or her life. Although this lack of character self-awareness has prompted critic Arthur F. Bethea, in his review of Adam Meyer’s book Raymond Carver (1995), to question an optimistic interpretation of these stories, citing the difficulty in trusting the judgment of characters who “indicate a limited ability to perceive the world coherently” (134), the important aspect is the change that takes place in the retelling. The narrator, like the one in “Cathedral,” becomes the audience, learning from the story that is being told about themselves. Robert L.

Ochberg discusses the nature of the narrator as the audience in relation to Psychology and telling life stories:

This sense making may be directed toward several audiences. First, of course, is the storyteller, who is simultaneously the narrator, the protagonist, and the first audience of the tale. Most stories are addressed also to an interlocutor...in turn, the response of the audience determines both the success of the story and the identity of the narrator. In sum, then, life stories are a way of fashioning identity, in both the private and public senses of that word. (114)

While “Cathedral” is often regarded as carver’s most epiphanic story, there are several earlier stories that demonstrate this narrative discovery and eventual plunge into a step forward toward identity achievement.

The epiphany the waitress in “Fat” reaches is partly due to her double retelling of the event, once to Rita then to the reader: “I am sitting over coffee and cigarets at my friend Rita’s and I am telling her about it. Here is what I tell her” (Will You Please...3). It’s as if the initial oratory purging of her story did not convince Rita, therefore the narrator fails to convince herself. This is suggested by Rita’s desire to hear more when the narrator tells her there is no more. “That’s it. Nothing else. He eats his desserts, and then he leaves and then we go home, Rudy and me” (Will You Please... 7).

She must then tell the story again, re-working out her flight into moratorium. If we consider the waitress’s personal account of the incident as a psychological utterance which suggests something implicitly significant within the diction, then we

must acknowledge the importance for the narrator to tell the reader that her account and apparent self-discovery has been told before. Repetition of narrative has an imperative function here: to keep the epiphany going--like an addict constantly announcing the break of a habit, in hopes of finally taking that first step. This of course doesn't necessarily mean the habit will be broken. The habitual eater who triggers the waitresses moratorium is a symbolic reminder of her own inability to break away from that which is not healthy--her relationship with Rudy. The difference is, however, that the fat man has accepted his fate, which is signified by his narrative referencing of himself as the pronoun "we".

Believe it or not, he says, we have not always eaten like this.

Me, I eat and eat and I can't gain, I say. I'd like to gain, I say.

No, he says. If we had our choice, no. But there is no choice.

(Will You Please... 7)

His repeated use of "we," coupled with the physical action of gorging, establishes his foreclosed identity. He is an individual who knows his lifestyle is detrimental to his health but continues to do so regardless. She, on the other hand, is in flux. She must retell the story, trying to find meaning in the incident that Rita cannot make sense of. However, she does add new details, which is another important function of the retold narrative. Every time an account is repeated, another significant detail is added, or deleted, depending on the speaker's current frame of mind. The second telling of her experience offers the reader new information Rita did not receive, the symbolic

sexual encounter with Rudy that places her in the shoes of the fat man: "...When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (Will You Please... 8). Her kinship to the fat man is not her weight, as we know she is not heavy; but it is the knowledge that she is living a foreclosed existence like the fat man that connects the two. However, unlike her obese customer, she will not accept her current identity status. In fact, she has talked herself into the desire to change, which is the first step to self-discovery, although the outcome is not definitively clear. Adam Meyer suggests this image of being proportionately bigger than Rudy to represent the narrator's newly acquired sense of power, which is gained by her symbolic overcompensation of size, inferring that Rudy has miniaturized her into submission (34).

The epiphany that often arises from the retelling, offers a glimpse of the first step into a moratorium. However, the epiphany or awareness of a life foreclosed can catapult the character into a perpetual state of stagnancy, or result in isolation or destruction, as well, particularly if the story is retold the same way every time. McAdams' describes the compulsive repetition of a life story as detrimental to living an authentic existence, reiterating Freud's claim that people have tendencies to continuously retell disturbing events from their past. McAdams' tells us that a common therapeutic goal is to halt or redirect the desire to relive the same life experiences (59). However, the waitress narrator in "Fat" adds details in the second telling of the story--the dream is added. This new detail redirects the story by establishing the image of metamorphosis. Although the image is distressing to her, it initiates her apparent moratorium. Suffering becomes a required element for success.

Hathcock suggests that narrative “means that the past is recoverable. It acts as a ‘getaway of hope’ into the future by revisiting the past” (33-34). Like many of Carver’s protagonists, she must suffer the pangs change before she can find emotional growth, and the optimistic reader knows she will.

Carver’s use of first person narrative allows the protagonist narrators to step outside of the story to examine their present states of existence. Then these characters are allowed the virtue of self-examination, which in turn, offers them a chance for an epiphanic insight. This often results in the self-awareness of a life foreclosed, which initiates the desire to begin a moratorium in search of identity.

### Conclusion:

Albert Camus claimed, “Art is the activity that exalts and denies simultaneously...” (253). This paradox (of validation and negation) is true when it comes to Raymond Carver’s exploration of the search for identity in his characters. They deny their current lives while they concurrently aspire to change them. It is this aspiration to change that must be embraced, and characters that do not, provide a lesson for readers to recognize this need in themselves. The empathetic and sympathetic reader sees his spouse, his neighbor, his co-worker, or himself in the destitution of Carver’s failed characters. The characters who are denied the nicely packaged happy ending, complete with a definitive denouement, are given something else in return: an option, a possibility that ambiguity and inconclusiveness will lead to transience, and thus, hope.

While the chronological order of intimacy achievement and identity achievement can be argued by psychologists, any layman may well agree that individual identity can transform--perpetually, or at least until one dies. However, the attainment of true intimacy on all levels creates new possibilities. Once one has given up on society and love, one becomes foreclosed. But foreclosure does not have to be a finished state. Moratorium exceeds well beyond adolescence and Carver himself exemplified the promise of this. He was indeed a man with a foreclosed identity, but would eventually break out of his passivity, although the process would appear as painful as a plot from one of his stories. Carver describes his early foreclosure in his essay “Fires,” from the short story collection of the same name:

My wife was supposed to graduate and go to the University of

Washington to study law on a fellowship. Instead, I made her pregnant, and we got married and began our life together. She was seventeen when the first child was born, eighteen when the second was born. What shall I say at this point? We didn't have any youth. We found ourselves in roles we didn't know how to play. (192)

In turn, his foreclosed marriage left him emotionally debilitated due to his failure to identify who he was and how to approach the unfamiliar social role he had acquired. It is no surprise that this failure to know how to act or to define one's true existence is the single most dominating theme in Raymond Carver's short stories. In essence, Carver's own inability to properly obtain "real" intimacy would become the fodder for some of the most insightful American short stories ever written.

Thus, Carver's was a foreclosed identity. The act of defining himself through marriage, ironically catapulted him into foreclosure. Erik H. Erikson recognized this common problem stating, "Unfortunately, many young people marry under such circumstances, hoping to find themselves in one another; but alas, the early obligation to act in a defined way, as mates and as parents, disturbs them in the completion of this work on themselves" (101). Carver's quick ascension into adulthood actually perpetuated a prolonged adolescence, since identity achievement is usually a precursor for adulthood. However, Carver's moratorium would not occur until his late thirties (adulthood) beginning after his last drink in 1977 and his meeting Tess Gallagher in 1978 (All of Us xxiv). His Distantation from harmful elements allowed him to find true intimacy and then discover himself.

Eventually, the identity he committed to in his youth was extinguished and a

new one was found. Before his death, Carver spoke of his victory over his failed identity and the discovery of a new and fruitful one:

That life is simply gone now, and I can't regret its passing. I have to live in the present. The life back then is gone just as surely --it's as remote to me as if it had happened to somebody I read about in a nineteenth century novel. I don't spend more than five minutes a month in the past. The past really *is* a foreign country and they do do different things there. Things happen. I really do feel I've had two different lives. (Fires 207)

Due to lung cancer which eventually resulted in a brain tumor (Meyer 17-18), Carver died at forty nine, an age not usually associated with the last achieved identity stages of Generativity and Integrity (Erikson 103-104). But his gift to posterity is evident. The evidence displayed in his work and life validates his personal achievement of Integrity, and awareness of the identity loss he once mourned but soon found. His last published piece before he died, the poem "Late Fragment," is a culmination of a life fulfilled and an identity no longer fragmented as the title might suggest:

And did you get what  
 you wanted from this life, even so?  
 I did.  
 And what did you want?  
 To call myself beloved, to feel myself  
 Beloved on this earth. (All of Us 294)

The author who commonly withheld the names of identity fractured characters which signified the destitution of their crisis of identity and lovelessness, deemed himself “beloved”--the honorable title for which all his characters strove for in their plight of identity--whether they knew it or not. His fiction as well as his life will be the models for an optimistic examination of the lifelong search for self-awareness, identity achievement, and, finally, self-acceptance.

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