

Introduction to Special Issue on Carver and Feminism

Claire Fabre-Clark, Université de Paris XII, France

Although a significant body of criticism has not failed to recognize the pervasive presence of women in Raymond Carver's work (Nesset, 1991; Gentry, 1993; Demory, 1999; Kleppe, 2006), an extensive, in-depth study of female voices from a purely feminist perspective is surprisingly lacking. In an attempt to fill the critical gap, *The Raymond Carver Review* is devoting this present issue to addressing the sexual and gender dynamics in Carver's writings, questioning, in the process, clichés and stereotypes concerning both sexes.

Taking a first glance at Carver's portrayal of gender, one suspects that the early association of his work with that of Hemingway—a first major influence—as well as the cinematographic transcription of such stories as “Tell the Women We're Going” or “So Much Water So Close to Home” may have contributed to eclipsing the vital space women occupy in Carver's world and casting his work as predominantly masculine in its imaginary scope. As that space becomes the focus of this issue's feminist lens, the domestic roles working-class women are confined to, their struggle to make sense of their lives, as well as their embryonic stirrings toward self-assertion, became parts of a discourse that deserves to be heard, not merely for women's own demands but also for the light it throws on men and the larger social structure.

One cannot ignore Carver's concern to depict with equal accuracy the yearnings and wounds suffered by women and men alike. In fact, to focus on women implies gazing on masculinity as well, as the two are interlocked, each a necessary mirror for the other. Far from evoking conventional heroes and past stereotypes, moreover, the masculinity that emerges

from its dialogue with the feminine shows men often not faring much better than—or even as well as—women in their confrontation with the everyday; so unheroic are they at times as to be antipodal to Hemingway, Carver’s early model.

The essays show, finally, that the stories are indeed nourished by culturally-inherited notions which they simultaneously subvert, forcing the reader to reconsider the different borders between definitions, including those of generic identities—also socially produced and no longer accepted as immutable or “factual.”

Toni and Leo’s tragedy in “Are These Actual Miles”—first published in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) as “What Is It?”—seems to illustrate in a nutshell the gender dynamics in all of Carver’s work. Toni’s probable prostitution act to ensure the sale of the convertible car, although it is never explicitly referred to, epitomizes men’s predation, the internalization of social pressure as to the instrumentalization of the female body (through the dubious metaphorical equivalence between the woman’s body and the car at the end of the story) together with guilt, anxiety and remorse. Nevertheless, desire infuses the poetics of the text, as if to counter the sordid stereotypes that it stages. Confronted with such complexity and irresoluteness, this special issue on Carver and Feminism consists not in randomly applying feminist theories or reading grids to Carver’s stories and poems, but rather in expanding the body of critical discussion on Carver by exploring his work through the selected lens of feminist criticism.

While acknowledging, in “Space, Domesticity and the Everyday: Re-reading Raymond Carver’s Women,” that the suburban domestic sphere to which women in Carver’s fiction have been confined most often leaves them numb, alienated and trapped in domestic routine, Aoileann Ní Éigearthaigh simultaneously questions the automatic association of such confinement with the negative. According to her, the idea that women lose all sense of identity in a space where self-realization is denied them needs re-assessment, as she

effectively shows many female protagonists challenging the structures of the dominant or constructing meaningful lives and identities within its constricting boundaries. This they accomplish by developing “tactics” that resist the male “strategies” aimed at marginalizing them. A case in point is the fulfilment Olla finds “within the symbolic richness of the home as a repository of memories and triumphs” she shares with her husband in “Feathers,” affirming that it “can constitute a positive, life-affirming space.” If men, furthermore, are offered a relative freedom or escape from the suffocating suburban structure, they never attain any heroic status by utilizing that freedom to “enhance” or “energize” their lives. In contrast, and without doing anything heroic or exceptional, women “find transcendence in the small acts of bravery and honesty that confront them on a daily basis.”

According to Vanessa Hall’s “Influences of Feminism and Class on Raymond Carver’s Short Stories,” if Carver espouses no “overt politics” in his stories, his sensitivity to the female condition turns them into “a valuable mirror of contemporaneous discourse on masculinity and femininity” in the 70s and 80s. Drawing “heavily on mainstream feminist discourse” of the period, his fictional depiction of their static lives in the home, with no possibility of escape or change, thus reflects Betty Friedan’s discussion of the “unfulfilling nature of full-time domestic work,” the fatigue and depression that result from its monotony. Despite their “back-seat status,” however, women manifest a resilience and resistance to the “stasis” in their lives, as well as a capacity to relate to others which make them superior to the lethargy and emotional paralysis the men most often succumb to in Carver’s stories. By showing empathy, furthermore, as well as a greater capacity to connect and identify with the experience of others, women become emblematic as well as paradigmatic for the working-class writer that he also is, struggling to overcome the biographical and socio-cultural obstacles to his creativity. Thus, women—and not only other writers or his children, as he writes in *Fires*—become overwhelming “influences” as well, even though, Hall rightly

observes, they are strangely not mentioned as such. It is “through several of his female characters,” in other words, “that he is most convincingly able to demonstrate an inner growth and ability to break out of individual bewilderment and isolation to connect imaginatively with others, a necessary skill for a writer.” By giving women a voice, in other words, he gives himself a voice as well.

The essays in this issue all show that the stories are indeed nourished by culturally-inherited notions which are simultaneously being subverted, thus forcing the reader to reconsider the different borders between definitions, including those of generic identities. In revealing the disjunctions that are at work at the heart of any identity, Carver anticipated recent theoretical studies that have shown gender identities as socially produced and no longer solidly and immutably “factual.” The question of masculinity, and how it is represented in Carver’s studies, is tackled in Josef Benson’s article “Masculinity as Homosocial Enactment in Three Stories by Raymond Carver.” By applying Michael Kimmel’s insights on men and masculinity, Benson demonstrates how Carver’s universe is permeated by male figures who are dependent on other males to prove their masculinity, thus generating homosocial desire. With the exception of the story “Cathedral,” women in this scenario “are more present in their absence or distorted context, allowing the males to proceed in their dialectical bonding, and emasculation.”

In the engaging opening to her study, “A feminist Re-vision of the Work of Interpretation in Raymond Carver’s ‘Cathedral,’” Eve Wiederhold asks her students to draw a cathedral, thus mimicking the last act of the narrator and Robert, the blind man in the eponymous story. The disappointing results—“pathetic scribbles” – point to a “failure in representation” in so far as the students “recreate the structure” in order to “capture the essence of ‘cathedralness.’” The word “essence,” of course, invokes the Platonic tradition—which sees truth as “universally and eternally valid” and language as a neutral vehicle rather

than active in shaping knowledge—or epistemologies where “the general is given priority over the specific; the abstract...over the phenomenal ‘real’; the intellectual and rational...over the embodied and the emotional.” Such essentialist thinking is at the root of the narrator’s pre-conceived notions about having “this blind man” in his house, unexamined responses and prejudices which should “challenge the reader to look more closely at his or her own response patterns” to narratives. Just as the narrator’s image of the blind, in other words, has been constructed “through artefacts in popular culture such as films,” readers also “read ‘the blind man’ in terms of cultural scripts” that typecast him as “the blind man who has true wisdom” or the “wholesome hero” and which “render him an idea rather than a person.” To resist the “rituals of reading” that merely appear to be “natural” and “logical” rather than “organized by cultural conventions,” Wiederhold argues for the insertion of the “feminine” into our interpretive constructs and conventions (“the personal, the touch of flesh, the sexually generated, the wandering gaze...”) along with the body, both more powerful in rendering the phenomenon in its present-ness, before “epistemologies that precede our interpretive acts” cause it to calcify into verbal “summations” and abstractions.

With the effort of a rigorous team of scholars on the editorial board and the continued support and advice of the editors, Robert Miltner and Vasiliki Fachard, this special issue of *The Raymond Carver Review* comprises a selection of fine and provocative essays that will hopefully contribute to moving forward what some colleagues have already called the third wave of Carver scholarship.