Stuck in Working-Class Limbo?

Everyday Life in Raymond Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*

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Samandrag

Raymond Carver (1938-1988) er best kjend for ei rekke noveller om den moderne amerikanske arbeidarklassen. Dei litterære portretta til Carver er markert av realisme, samt eit spartant estetisk utrykk. Denne oppgåva tek føre seg den første novellesamlinga hans frå 1976, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. Tema som rusmisbruk, samlivsbrot og økonomiske vanskar er gjennomgåande i samlinga. Den kritiske responsen har dermed fokusert på desse vanskelege og ofte uløyselege utfordringane som definerande for essensen av karakterane til Carver. Dette har resultert i ein til tider problematisk diskurs rundt den fiktive arbeidarklassen, som totalt fanga og stagnert i ei uuthaldeleg røynd.

Denne oppgåva baserer seg på prinsippa til everyday life scholarship for å understreke korleis Carver sitt fiktive proletariat kan handle på meiningsfulle måtar trass i avgrensa sosioøkonomiske føresetnadar. Dette inneberer eit syn på kvardagen som ein signifikant arena, der viktige handlingar, refleksjonar og estetiske uttrykk kan ta plass. Med dette som utgangspunkt revurderer denne oppgåva tre sentrale kritiske påstandar. Fyrst, ideen om at proletariatet Carver presenterer for oss ikkje reagerer i samspel med utfordringane dei møter. Deretter, argument om at dei materielle omgivnadane til karakterane er eit grunt portrett av moderne liv under kapitalismen, blotta for symbolsk vekt. Til slutt problematiserer oppgåva påstandar om at karakterane til Carver manglar eit språk som kan fange og definere viktige refleksjonar. Basert på argumenta everyday life scholarship tilbyr kan vi utvide desse påstandane, slik at vi deltek i ein rettferdig og nyansert diskurs rundt litterær arbeidarklasserepresentasjon.

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Introduction

Raymond Carver (1938-1988) is best known for his short fiction, which offers a realist and spartan portrayal of modern working-class life. Throughout his relatively short career, Carver's artistic focus remained rooted in the concerns of proletarian characters. His portrayal of blue-collar Americans offers an antithesis to the capitalist idealizations often upheld within the framework of contemporary culture. Carver's oeuvre challenges the notion of hard work and determination as a guarantee for success. His characters lead difficult lives with no clear pathways to prosperity or fulfillment. There are, however, nuances and fine gradations to the challenges they face, their ways of life, and the manner in which they speak and think. In my view, Carver's literary effort results in a strikingly complex portrayal of blue-collar lives. The intricacy of his writing provides a fruitful vantage point to discuss the mechanics of literary working-class representation. Carver's first short story collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, published in 1976, is particularly ripe for this purpose and will be the focus of this thesis.

In a 1984 *New York Times* article, Bruce Weber dubbed Carver a "chronicler of blue-collar despair" (1). This title has since stuck, and the alleged despair of Carver's working-class characters remains a prominent topic of critical discourse on his work. In summing up the contents of his first collection, David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips write: "[h]is characters are the unemployed and the unhappily employed, laconic members of the non-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" (1979, 76). Echoing these sentiments on Carver's characters, Kirk Nesset underlines "the politics of fortune and fate, which, forever unseen and unheard, dictate the bleak circumstances of their lives, provoking the bafflement and dismay that is for them a daily fact of existence" (1991, 294). Finally, Alexander Styhre argues that in "Carver's fiction, life simply is what it is, dragging on; while there is apparently much that could be done to amend an unfavorable situation, there are relatively few people who have the capacity, or the determination, to do so, leaving them in the existential limbo where they have ended up" (2017, 180).

Although these scholars are not blind to the complexity of Carver's fictional proletariat, the overarching impression is clear. According to critics, everyday life for the typical Carverian subject appears bleak in its irresolvable hopelessness. I find that this conclusion is underdeveloped at best, and at worst, legitimizes a harmfully simplistic approach to the lives of workers. I do not want to deny the bleakness of Carver's early work.

If we are to address the full scope and weight of his literary working-class representation, we must, of course, recognize the arduous aspects of the lives of his characters. I agree that Carver's first collection addresses the implications of working-class despair. This proves especially important if we consider it in the broader historical context after the American labor movements of the 1930s and 40s failed to unify a diversely composed working class on a political and economic level (Davis 1986, 8). This led to a deprivation of representative institutions for the American proletariat which, as a consequence, has been more easily integrated into capitalism (ibid.). *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* was published at the brink of the neo-liberal surge of the 1980s, the aftermath of which has seen an increasing neglect of the working-class. As Ben Harker notes, the "submerged population to which Carver describes belonging lacked visibility in a double sense: they were under-represented politically and culturally" (2007, 719). Consequently, one might argue that the inclusion of adversity in Carver's early work is particularly significant, as it is situated in a time when the voice of American workers faced systemic erasure.

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? provides a critical rendering of blue-collar existence in a context where the interests of the American working-class endured increasing neglect in tangent with the growth of individualist ideologies. Within the collection, there are clear limitations imposed on the characters. Carver's subjects cannot necessarily do much to change their economic position. As a consequence, the effect of systemic stagnation manifests itself in social issues such as emotional distress, substance abuse, and interpersonal conflict. It is easy to associate the irresolvable nature of the challenges Carver's proletariat face with the mechanics of despair. However, as I see it, the recurring problems featured in Carver's first collection speak mainly to how his working-class subjects orient themselves within an economic and social system that is rigged and unfair. What I take issue with in the critical response is the assumption that a disadvantageous class-position by default implies that the lives led within the system are exclusively bleak and forlorn and that Carver's subjects are relegated to an entirely passive position under the weight of their circumstances. As I see it, Carver's early characters prove decidedly active, despite their position within a set framework of structures. If we recognize the ways they act dynamically within the parameters of class, we can also appreciate how Carver's narratives move far beyond despair.

While the economic system entrapping Carver's early characters create bleak circumstances, the subjects' responses to their conditions prove nuanced and complex. I therefore take issue with the wording chosen by the critics above, deeming the lives of Carver's working-class subjects as "unrealized", marked by "dismay" and "bafflement", or

simply as “an existential limbo”. In my view, this type of discourse falls into the danger of confirming rather than addressing the power imbalances of class. We can attain a fuller and more productive approach to Carver’s working-class representation if we recognize the resources at the disposal of his characters, be it in concrete actions, ways of living, or modes of reflection and communication. I believe this amounts to a more respectful discussion on working subjects, as opposed to a one-sided focus on arrangements beyond their control.

In my opinion, it is noteworthy that the most pessimistic readings of Carver tend to be directed at his early work. Carver wrote the stories featured in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* during the sixties and seventies. Throughout this time, he was himself working-class. Both Carver and his first wife Maryann took blue-collar jobs as they struggled to support their children. As a consequence, critics often outline parallels between his working-class beginnings and the bleak tone of his early work. To some extent, the author helped create this connection. Speaking on his struggle with alcoholism during his proletarian past, Carver said, “I was finished as a writer and a viable, functioning adult male. It was over for me, that’s why I can speak of two lives, that life and this life” (Weber 1984, 4). Here, Carver drives a wedge between his strenuous origins and later success as a writer. Referring to his working-class past as “that life”, it undergoes an epistemological separation from the reality he found himself leading after his breakthrough. In a sense, this supports a notion of working-class existence as something that can only lend hope if it is escaped; The everyday of working subjects is treated as a situation compelling to inspect from a position of privilege, be it as critic or writer, but not somewhere we would like to find ourselves.

With this in mind, one might ask how class-prejudice has affected the scholarly discourse on *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. In contrast to Carver’s first publications, Bruce Marshall Gentry and William L. Stull describe later stories as written in a richer, fuller, and more hopeful key (1990, xiv). I agree that there is a discernable development in style throughout Carver’s oeuvre. Still, one might question if these differences are clearly pronounced, or if the context of Carver’s personal life has had a more considerable impact on readings of his works. As I see it, it is interesting that the optimism surrounding his publications increased in tangent with his social mobility. Could there be a greater critical eagerness to find hope in Carver’s later collections, simply because his personal circumstances seemed more hopeful? If this should be the case, it connects perhaps to a cultural idealization of economic success as a means to fulfillment. Because Carver’s early characters do not enjoy high chances for this kind of mobility, their lives are easily regarded

as fundamentally hopeless and lacking in direction. In my view, this approach to blue-collar existence, although in this case, fictitious, is problematic.

Some of the questionable critical attitudes to the working class have been developed by the very tradition formed to address and champion it, namely Marxism. Although this theoretical approach has done much to challenge the power relations between the bourgeois and the proletariat, it is sometimes marked by an overbearing approach to workers. This is a line of criticism that has been leveled against Louis Althusser's influential theoretical work. In his 1965 *Reading Capital,* Althusser introduces his notion of "symptomatic reading" (1970, 28). He explains this type of reading as such:

> To see this invisible, to see these 'oversights', to identify the lacunae in the fullness of this discourse, the blanks in the crowded text, we need something quite different from an acute or attentive gaze; we need an *informed gaze*, a new gaze, itself produced by a reflection of the 'change of terrain' on the exercise of vision, in which Marx pictures the transformation of the problematic. (1970, 27)

Althusser insists in effect that a true understanding of a text requires expert theoretical knowledge that can uncover hidden meanings. In its essence, the symptomatic reading supposes that a text is never "overt", but rather a "hieroglyph" that must be deciphered (Davis 2010, 5). This logic is liable to assume a problematic and far-reaching implication, namely that the working-class lacks the ability or expertise to truly grasp the fundamental circumstances that govern their lives, the logic of a "hidden" social system that keeps them oppressed (Davis 2010, 13).

Other Marxist-influenced theorists have taken issue with these implications, criticizing Althusser's approach for perpetuating hierarchal power structures. Jacques Rancière, once a student of Althusser and a contributor to *Reading Capital*, has been a vocal and influential critic. In Davis's summary, "Althusserianism is judged by Rancière to be a condescending philosophy which protects the social privilege of those institutionally associated with it" (2010, 14). Instead, Rancière enjoins us to reject the idea that only expert intellectuals can truly interpret texts or the world. In contrast to Althusser's call for an educated gaze, he states that "[a]ny opposition between the 'intellectual creations' of the worker and the wild imaginings of the philosopher in chains is completely illusory" (2004, 75). Rancière thus moves away from the idea that only elite groups enjoy the resources necessary to participate in interpretation and understanding. Overall, the nexus of his argument is always to assume

the "equality of intelligences" of all subjects (2009, xii). In my view, this approach can facilitate a more respectful discourse on working-class representation.

In particular, Rancière's arguments incite a consideration of the working-class beyond that of subjects passively adhering to set circumstances. Utilizing the mechanics of the theater, he questions the way we deem spectators as passive to a complicated process unfolding on the stage before them (Rancière 2009, 2). Rancière argues that "[e]mancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting" (2009, 13). He suggests the "spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets" (ibid.). Overall, Rancière considers spectators as "active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them" (ibid.). Although this specific argument is grounded in discussions on the theater, it also accosts critical approaches to the working-class. As noted above, some traditions within Marxist discourse view workers as passive observers to the harmful mechanics of capitalist ideology. In contrast, Rancière incites an approach to working subjects as dynamically engaged with the circumstances that structure their existence. This lends an approach to blue-collar representation that recognizes how workers are, in fact, active despite navigating a more set socio-economic framework. Furthermore, it rejects the notion of a separation between working subjects and the structures that affect them. Instead, we can recognize a dynamic relationship between individuals and circumstances that is nuanced and complex.

Although Rancière invites a critical examination of the limitations of Marxist discourse, his arguments do not warrant a rejection of Marxism altogether. As Davis stresses, "Rancière's target is scientism, the idea that the proletariat are incapable of understanding their political function without the pedagogical assistance of bourgeois intellectuals" (2010, 17). I agree that the it is the logic of scientism we must be wary of if we are to take working-class subjects seriously. This can be challenging, especially when interpreting literature. As Rita Felski points out, critical interpretations quickly lead to "explanation-as-accusation, where accounting for the social causes of something serves as a means of downgrading it. X turns out, at the deepest level, to be about the more fundamental and foundational Y" (2015, 23). Felski underlines how "suspicious readings" become attuned to a presupposed underlying context, and as a result, turn out template-like or reductive interpretations that neglect the complexity of the subjects at hand (ibid.). In relation to *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, a critical reading faces the task of balancing the validity of the social and historical context of the contemporary American working-class, while still recognizing the specified complexity of its characters. In my view, Marxism can offer a vital tool to secure such a balance. Still, as

both Rancière and Felski make us aware, the history of this critical tradition carries with it some important precautions we should remain aware of.

The field of "everyday life" critique shares aspects of Rancière's outlook and can provide an alternative approach to Carver's literary representations of the working class. As Harris M. Berger and Giovanna P. Del Negro put it, everyday life scholarship takes an interest in:

> a range of populist positions – that "everyday people" (rather than elites) are creative, that "everyday spaces" (rather than concert halls or museums) are the social sites of the expressive, that the pragmatic activities of everyday life (rather than the "fine arts") may be richly aesthetic, and that the boundary between instrumental and expressive practices is a highly fluid one. (2004, 5)

We often associate the expressions of aesthetics, meaning, and beauty with designated arenas of life that usually belong to elite culture. The everyday becomes the realm to which working-subjects are assigned, as a place where nothing significant seems to arise. Everyday life studies challenges this notion. It suggests that the everyday can serve as grounds for expressions that are deeply significant. Not only does it allow us to recognize the meaning of everyday phenomena in and of themselves, everyday life scholarship also opens up the possibilities of a realm that is available to and at the disposal of working-class subjects.

Indeed, there are similarities between typical conceptions of the everyday and working-class alike. Both concepts are often associated with the mundane or insignificant. As a consequence, this implies that the validity of the everyday of working-class lives, in particular, is often neglected. Didier Eribon argues this has led to a sense of erasure for working subjects:

> To whom can they refer, who can they lean on, in order to provide themselves with a political existence and a cultural identity? Or in order to feel proud of themselves because they have been legitimized and because this legitimation has come from a powerful source? A source that, in the simplest terms, takes into account who they are, how they live, what they think about, what they want? (2013, 46)

In this passage, Eribon raises important questions on working-class representation, which I do not aim to resolve in this thesis. However, I do believe everyday life studies can offer a means to address the "source" he speaks of. As a theoretical framework, it can address, if not fully comprise, the complexity inherent in the ways the working-class lives, thinks, and desires.

Keeping this as an ambition, we can aim to overcome reductive considerations of blue-collar subjects.

In relation to Carver's work, in particular, the everydayness of his texts has been noted by critics. Still, I argue the full significance of the everyday in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* has escaped scholarly attention. For instance, Martin Scofield argues Carver's characters are "preoccupied with the simplest elements of life - food, drink, work, relationships - in a way that is highly circumscribed by their limitations" and that "[t]he world of reflection and articulation is largely denied them" (1994, 244). Scofield continues to write that, "[t]heir culture consists mainly of television and drinking" and that "[b]ecause they do not divert themselves with the sophisticated attractions of art or ideas, they come up the more painfully against the baffling question of what they are doing and why" (ibid.). Scofield's sentiments evoke several inquiries when confronted with the logic of everyday life studies. Firstly, what he calls the "simplest elements of life" could be regarded as the foundation for deeply meaningful phenomena. Secondly, his referral to the "world of reflection and articulation" is striking. Cannot this obscure realm be found within the everyday and thus at the reach of Carver's characters? Lastly, his claim to the spare contents of their "culture" and separation from "art" and "ideas" appears somewhat elitist. I would contest the idea that Carver's characters cannot reflect or engage on an aesthetic level. If we recognize the everyday as an arena where these things are possible, we are better equipped to take the characters in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* seriously.

As my overarching concern for this thesis, I challenge the idea that Carver's contemporary workers exist in an everyday that is unequivocally bleak, grey, and meaningless. Much has been said about the predicaments of their blue-collar existence. I recognize that this remains a vital issue. However, Carver's rendering of a contemporary working-class America can only be fully addressed if we recognize the everyday as a significant and meaningful realm. In so doing, we can challenge the notion that his portrayal of working-class characters, environments, and languages merely communicates despair. If we are to take the concerns of Carver's fictitious proletariat seriously, we must recognize the modes of expression at their disposal. Accordingly, my thesis challenges three main claims which I discern from the critical discourse on *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. Firstly, the idea that his characters remain passive in reaction to their circumstances. Secondly, that their material surroundings merely reflect the limitations of contemporary consumer lifestyles. Finally, that the ways they use language and expression fail to grasp matters of significance. In line with everyday life scholarship, I reconsider these critical sentiments. In so doing, my

aim is to open up *Will You Please, Be Quiet Please?* to new and important ways of addressing literary working-class representation.

My first chapter reads "They're Not Your Husband" and "Neighbors" in order to problematize the notion of mobility for Carver's working-class characters. Because the subjects in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* have limited opportunities for social-mobility, critics have often read them as essentially static. I enjoin theories presented by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel De Certeau in order to recognize other forms of mobility that do not connect to class ascension. Carver's characters are, in fact, active, as they utilize everyday practices in order to resist the societal structures entrapping them. Overall, I find that the everyday lives of Carver's subjects constitute a complex field of resistance and reproduction. My objective is not to heighten or celebrate their actions. Instead, I want to challenge the critical approach to these subjects as fundamentally cemented and dormant. In my view, Carver's characters prove dynamic through their navigations within the parameters of their class-position.

In my second chapter, I briefly revisit "Neighbors" before moving on to "What Is It?" and "What's in Alaska?". My interpretations consider the significance of Carver's portrayal of material surroundings. Drawing from Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968) I discuss the figurative meaning of objects in an interactive relation to the characters. Critics have already noted the possible implications of the objects included in Carver's early work. However, I find some scholarly readings rigidly follow interpretative patterns associated with one-sided approaches to Carver, be it as a realist or minimalist writer. At one end, we arrive at a consideration of material surroundings as constructive of a symbolically shallow photo-realism (Mullen 1998, 122). On the other end, materials are seen as symbolically reflexive of the subjects' servitude to possessions in contemporary capitalist society. In my view, the Carverian object is not so easily pinned down. Instead, I engage with various approaches to material and meaning in Carver's early narratives. My aim is to underline the dynamic and interactive relationship between subjects and objects in Carver's first short story collection.

My third and last chapter focuses on "Fat" and "Why, Honey?" and how the characters' use language and communicate meaning. The colloquial and fragmented modes of expression employed by Carver's subjects have led some critics to claim they are incapable of addressing matters of significance. Basing my argument on the principles of Ludwig Wittgenstein's language philosophy, I argue that Carver's working subjects demonstrate interesting and meaningful communication strategies. Focusing on Carver's female characters, I consider how they construct and deconstruct myths in order to address personal

experiences arising in their everyday. These communicative practices serve as tools both for inner reflection and outward communication. Furthermore, Carver's literary women use their everyday modes of expression to produce narratives which function as broader social commentary. In an oeuvre where female characters often do not enjoy the fullness of voice granted to their male counterparts, their stories prove particularly important.

Chapter One: Everyday Rituals

Dynamic Acts of Resistance and Reproduction in "They're Not Your Husband" and "Neighbors"

Critics often deem the working-class characters in Raymond Carver's work as hopelessly static. Alexander Styhre claims that "Carver's fiction masterfully apprehends the essence of the mundane experience, a being that is strangely familiar, and yet harrowing in its emptiness and lack of ambition and hope" (2017, 180). David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips argue Carver "writes about characters whose lives are in suspended animation" as if stuck in limbo (1979, 76). Gareth Cornwell adds to this bleak sentiment, stating that the subjects of Carver's oeuvre "typically drift through life, passively reacting to circumstances whose provenance or true relation to themselves they are unable to discern, let alone attempt to address" (2005, 345). This despondent mode of discourse is especially prominent in responses to Carver's early fiction. In his first short story collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, his gallery of characters is relatively homogenous, consisting mainly of blue-collar subjects. I see the academic response, which connects Carver's working-class characters to a state of complete immobility, as potentially problematic.

It is true that the subjects in Carver's first collection face complicated problems. Challenges such as unemployment, alcoholism, and marital tension serve as reoccurring obstacles. These difficulties undeniably connect to the lack of socioeconomic mobility available to working-class subjects, and critics are not unwarranted in noting them as a distinctive element in Carver's early fiction. However, within this discourse lies a tendency to measure his characters against ideals prescribed by capitalism, such as professional success, wealth, or corporate productivity. In my view, accepting capitalist terms as a means to underline the characters' immobility, in all senses of the word, only serves to patronize and diminish them. In order to take them more seriously, I suggest we recognize their ability to act dynamically within the structures that entrap them in their everyday lives. In so doing, we can fully address the complexity of Carver's literary portrayal of the modern American working-class. This approach is closely related to the principles of everyday life scholarship (Del Negro and Berger 2004, 4). It provides a perspective that underlines the significance of "everyday practices, artifacts, and expressions" (Del Negro and Berger 2004, 5). In line with this sentiment, we can consider the "instrumental" practices of the everyday as highly expressive (ibid.).

Indeed, everyday life studies illuminates the relevance of minutiae, which are often disregarded as insignificant. When reading early Carver, this viewpoint helps us move away from stagnant determinism in favor of dynamic complexity. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), Michel De Certeau underlines the everyday as the key arena within which subjects cunningly outwit, appropriate, and resist structures. Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, initially presented in his 1972 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, complicates De Certeau's dialectical opposition of the oppressed and the oppressor. He suggests that there exists a reproductive relationship between individuals and structures. The notion of reproduction is also discussed by Rita Felski in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (2000), where she argues that the everyday often perpetuates the gender hierarchy. In line with this observation, Martha C. Nussbaum's "Objectification" (1995) exemplifies various practices that result in the reduction of people to things. Finally, Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) portrays daily acts and environments as elements of an elaborate performance. These critics cover vast fields, from Marxist theory to feminism and dramaturgy. However, they all offer a consideration of the everyday as inherently complex. With this perspective as my vantage point, I want to reconsider Carver's early working-class characters.

One should note that, at first glance, the theoretical frameworks of De Certeau and Bourdieu's seem particularly oppositional. De Certeau appears hopeful when he argues that weakened subjects can resist the structural grid which entraps them. In opposition, Bourdieu's discourse mandates that subjects are not only entrapped within the structures of society but also actively reproduce them in a circular fashion. This naturally leads us to question whether agents can resist structures through actions if their actions also are conditioned to reproduce structures. De Certeau notes Bourdieu's arguments as irreconcilable with his discourse in *Practice*, underlining how his "texts are fascinating in their analysis and aggressive in their theory… [s]crupulously examining practices and their logic… [his] texts finally reduce them to a mystical reality, the *habitus*, which is to bring them under the law of reproduction" (1988, 59). The opposing conclusions of De Certeau and Bordieu present a dilemma too vast to be fully addressed in this thesis. However, I propose that an intertwining of their approaches, accompanied by the ideas of Felski, Nussbaum, and Goffman, aid a consideration of the everyday lives of Carver's blue-collar characters as a complex space of resistance and reproduction. Instead of disregarding their existence within the structural matrix as hopelessly static, these theorists can help us understand how the acts of working-class subjects have a specialized, rebellious, and dynamic nature.

In line with this approach, this chapter explores the dynamic ways characters in two early Carver stories, “They’re Not Your Husband” and “Neighbors”, resist the structures of their everyday through ways of operating that construct rituals. Note that I depart from the conventional definition of rituals, and apply it as a term to frame the form, content, and effect of the ways of operating employed in specific seances initiated by the characters. Ultimately, I argue that Carver’s subjects are highly dynamic. My objective is not to heighten or celebrate his characters’ activities, but rather to challenge the critical approach to their everyday existence as hopeless, cemented, and dormant. I suggest we approach these working subjects with nuance, in order to avert a reductive and pragmatic discourse on the fictitious proletariat. In so doing, we can recognize Carver’s early texts as a nuanced literary portrayal of the modern American working class.

In “They’re Not Your Husband”, Earl Ober, an out of work salesman, visits the coffee shop where his wife, Doreen, works as a waitress. When he overhears two businessmen degrade his wife’s body on account of her size, he pushes her to lose weight, with the ultimate goal of recreating the scenario and showcase an “improved” version of his spouse. I consider the businessmen’s activity as a ritual aimed at a resistance to the structure of their workplace, where they bargain over Doreen’s physique and consequently enjoy a unified consumption of her image. In response to the ritual, Earl attempts to act dynamically through tactics aimed at a recreation of the sequence. His response to the businessmen’s interaction, negotiation with Doreen, and finally, overt involvement in her weight-loss process illustrate scenarios where he employs mental, verbal, and physical tactics. Earl’s ritual is complicated as we consider the structures of his everyday life, as his recreation can be interpreted as an attempted rite of passage in the class system. Finally, Nussbaum’s conception of objectification illuminates how the duplicate rituals lead to a reproduction of the gender hierarchy. This reproduction is also reflected in the narrative itself, as it denies Doreen agency in the process of objectification she endures, and thus participates in an exclusion similar to that executed by the male characters.

In “Neighbors”, Bill and Arlene Miller watch Jim and Harriet Stones’ apartment while they are away. The families live in the same building and lead comparable lives. Still, the Millers idolize the Stones, and consequently, experience their apartment as a mystical space to which they find themselves continually drawn. I move beyond the conventional reading of the story and argue that Bill and Arlene envy not the personas of Jim and Harriet, but rather their flexible relationship to the structures of their everyday. Theory drawn from Goffman enables a consideration of the Stone household as a setting akin to a theatrical stage, its

connection to tactics, and finally, how Bill uses this space as a foundation for his ritual. As with the purpose of the rituals discussed in the first story, Bill aims to resist the structures of his everyday. His ritual is constructed through a shedding of the self and a consequent performance as a flexible character capable of dynamic movement through personal fronts. This movement is underlined as Bill dresses in women's clothes. In so doing, he challenges the rigid oppositions mandated by social constructions of gender, and by extension, deserts the dominating ideology to which Earl subscribes. Consequently, Bill's ritual holds the promise of a more positive reproduction of an anti-hierarchal and anti-categorical mindset. This affords his ritual with a success affirmed through its effect on the Millers' everyday. It paves the way for other ways of operating and strengthens the bond between the couple. Although this story showcases a more positive example of rituals, I also note how it exercises a problematic exclusion of the female point of view. Before I engage further with these texts, I wish to establish the theoretical framework which girds my argument.

Ways of Operating: Acts of Resistance to Structures in the Everyday

We begin with De Certeau's theory on ways of operating, which focuses on the individual's ability to creatively resist the oppressive structures burgeoning in modern, capitalist society. His explanation of *la perruque* captures the essence of this objective, and he defines it as "the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer" (1988, 25). *La perruque* is employed through small workplace activities, such as having a cup of coffee or staring into the distance. These acts are distinctly anti-capitalist because they constitute "work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit" (De Certeau 1988, 25). De Certeau also underlines *la perruque* as a means for creative expression, because subjects "take something from the order of knowledge in order to inscribe 'artistic achievements' on it and to carve in it the graffiti of their debts of honor" (De Certeau 1988, 28). The moments we steal for ourselves throughout the workday offer junctures where we can creatively resist the capitalist pressure for efficiency. It is essential that these acts of defiance take place in the sphere of everyday life. We will see this sentiment reflected in the Carver texts, were the workplace often holds a dominating presence. Furthermore, *la perruque* embodies the central message of De Certeau's ways of operating.

De Certeau also underlines the significance of daily routine. He argues that we find ways of operating in "ways of walking, reading, producing, speaking etc." (1988, 30). He classifies these activities as "styles of action" which unfold simultaneously on two levels (ibid). At the first level, there is a "field" functioning as a regulatory force; for example, the

workplace, school, or government (De Certeau 1988, 30). The second level is situated within the field constituted by the first level. However, in this subordinated space, subjects can implement self-made "rules" which turn the situation to "their advantage" (ibid.). In order to exemplify this twofold dynamic, De Certeau considers an immigrant living in Paris or Roubaix, who despite being restricted to "the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, [he] establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity" (De Certeau 1988, 30). Although the immigrant is restricted by a foreign system, such as housing or language, they can still resist these structures by use of ways of operating informed by their preference, demonstrated in creative acts such as speaking, cooking, or dwelling. De Certeau's argument for the significance of everyday practices helps us reconsider the activities of Carver's characters beyond instrumental acts, and recognize how these carry significance for the narrative.

However, ways of operating are not always as overt, as demonstrated by De Certeau's conception of "consumption" (1988, 31). He argues it is difficult to determine what we make of the consumption of sensory inputs around us, because the production and distribution of images in capitalist society are intensified by the progress of technology (1988, 31). He portrays a fragmented reality where "products are scattered in the graphs of televised, urbanistic, and commercial production…all the less visible because the networks framing them are becoming more and more tightly woven, flexible, and totalitarian" (1988, 31). As De Certeau elaborates, "the television viewer cannot write anything on the screen of his set. He has been dislodged from the product; he plays no role in its appropriation. He loses his authors rights and becomes, or so it seems, a pure receiver" (ibid.). Despite an ostensible passiveness, De Certeau views the consumption of images as a "quiet activity" marked by "ruses", "fragmentation", and "poaching" exercised by the consumer (ibid.). A subject's consumption leaves no physical products, like the making of a hat or a shoe; its productive quality lies in the act itself, as "an art of using" imposed images (ibid.). In short, consumption transforms "imposed knowledge and symbolisms" so that they "become objects manipulated by practitioners who have not produced them" (De Certeau 1988, 32). Especially in relation to "They're Not Your Husband", De Certeau's discourse on consumption illuminates the dynamic quality of acts which are not physically covert, and therefore easily misjudged as passive.

A final way of operating worth noting is the tactic. The tactic is best defined against De Certeau's conception of the strategy, as he portrays these as tools reserved adjacently for the weak and strong. A strategy is "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships

that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated" (De Certeau 1988, 35-36). This demonstrates how strategic movements are reserved for groups that enjoy a degree of power. In opposition, the tactic serves as a "calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" (De Certeau 1988, 37). As a result, these actions have an inherent "mobility", as they are never tied down (ibid.). Still, De Certeau notes that the "space of a tactic is the space of the other" (ibid.). This means that tactics are executed within a closed system and thus depend on the ability to outwit and trick overarching power structures (De Certeau 1988, 38). In summation, the tactic is determined by an "absence of power" as opposed to the strategy, which depends on it (De Certeau 1988, 38). In Carver's texts, we see this twofold dynamic at play, where subjects constantly find themselves within spaces which have been arranged by others. For example, Earl inserts himself into a ritual which is structured by strange men, whilst Bill enters his neighbors' apartment. In both examples, we find the characters use "the space of the other" as a foundation for dynamic acts. Furthermore, the lopsided power dynamic between the weak and strong remains a central crux in De Certeau's argument. For those caught at the bottom society's structural matrix, ways of operating present a tool for resistance.

Habitus: Reproduction, Class, and Capital

Where De Certeau's theory places emphasis on the notion of resistance, Pierre Bourdieu's habitus suggests there exists an interactive relationship between subjects and the production of structures. Bourdieu defines habitus as a set of "durable, transposable *dispositions*" (1977, 72). His explanation of these "dispositions" is multifarious, as it covers a discussion spanning from actions, personal taste, to actual bodily stance and movement. In short, the habitus can be described up as a "mental filter that structures an individual's perceptions, experiences, and practices such that the world takes on a taken-for-granted commonsense appearance" (Appelrouth and Edles 2016a, 666). Concerning my approach to Carver, habitus offers, most importantly, a concept which conjoins the individual, structures, and the reproductive relationship between them. As Richard Jenkins notes, the "central plank in Bourdieu's sociological platform is his attempt to transcend the…choice between subjectivism and objectivism" (1992, 40). The habitus is acquired through the individual's interaction with objective structures that are "constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of class condition)" (Bourdieu 1977, 72). In turn, the individual internalizes these material conditions, and through the process, acquires a personal habitus. The reproduction in this relationship is reflected in its circular nature. The "structured

structures" in society function as "structuring structures" to the individual, who, in turn, acting in tangent with the mental filter of habitus, structures these structures (Bourdieu 1977, 72).

Through this circular relationship, habitus also secures the longevity of socioeconomic class. As Randal Johnson interprets Bourdieu, "[a]gents do not act in a vacuum, but rather in concrete social situations governed by a set of objective social relations" (1993, 6). The choices of the individual remain connected through habitus to historically meditated possibilities attached to class. All actions are informed by "past conditions which have produced the principle of their production, that is, by the actual outcome of identical interchangeable past practices" (Bourdieu 1977, 72-73). Jenkins helps clarify this statement:

> Bourdieu is arguing that the objective world in which groups exist, and the objective environment – other people and things – as experienced from the point of view of individual members of the group, is the product of the past practices of this generation and previous generations. History culminates in an ongoing and seamless series of moments and is continuously carried forward in a process of production and reproduction in the practices of everyday life. (1992, 50)

In other words, habitus, which is shaped by objective conditions, in turn, mandates "aspirations and practices objectively compatible with those objective requirements" (Bourdieu 1977, 77). This aspect of habitus underlines how, despite being a personal mental filter, it also has a lasting quality as a social phenomenon. Our expectations, aspirations, and possibilities in society are the result of similar outcomes mediated over time. As Bourdieu puts it, we learn to "refuse what is anyway refused and to love the inevitable" (1977, 77). In line with Bourdieu's argument, individuals act in tangent with their class position, but this is not due to personal preference or ambition. Instead, there is an intertwined relationship between the individual's possibilities in society prescribed by class, and their perception and responding practices. This is important to note in relation to Carver's texts, as it underlines how movement within the structural matrix of society has limitations.

A final aspect to note concerning habitus is its relation to capital and its significance in the formation of group coherence. Bourdieu connects habitus to different kinds of capital the individual possesses, where two remain particularly central: economic and cultural capital. Economic capital represents "material resources – wealth, land, money – that one controls or possesses" (Appelrouth and Edles 2016a, 667). Cultural capital consists of "nonmaterial goods such as educational credentials, types of knowledge and expertise, verbal skills, and aesthetic preferences" (ibid.). These two forms of capital become "internalized via the habitus

by forming a social space within which points of view are taken. Within this social space, individuals are positioned relative to one another (ibid.). In the end, "the closer individuals are to one another in terms of the amount and types of capital they possess, the more they have in common (ibid.). Bourdieu formulates capital as a key aspect of group coherence: "finally it is an immediate adherence, at the deepest level of the habitus, to the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions fantasies and phobias which, more than declared opinions, forge the unconscious unity of class" (Bourdieu 1984, 47). As we read the Carver narratives, capital provides a tool to problematize coherence between and within class-positions. Overall, Bourdieu's conception of habitus portrays a circular relationship between the individual and structures. This viewpoint can help us understand how Carver's working-class subjects face limitations within the societal structures that entrap them, yet also have the capacity to reproduce them through their actions. This incites an approach to their activities that remains attuned to the complex and at times problematic connection between everyday practices and the reproduction of structures.

Felski, Nussbaum, and Goffman: Problematizing the Everyday Further

De Certeau and Bourdieu's concerns regarding class, capitalism, and consumerism in relation to the individual illuminates the complexity of modern everyday life. Still, there are gaps in the discourse, especially in their consideration of gender. As Rita Felski points out, we need to consider the "everyday world as problematic", especially for women (2000a, 93). Repeating Dorothy Smith's observation, she stresses that "it is here above all, that gender hierarchy is reproduced, invisibly pervasively, and over time" (ibid.). Gender is already a topic of discussion in direct relation to Carver's authorship. As Venessa Hall underlines, Carver's stories are most often "narrated from a white, male perspective" and remain "consistently attuned to the limitation of gender roles" (2010, 175). Bruce Marshall Gentry notes Carver's tendency to reserve broader philosophical reflections for his male characters (1993, 89). While female working-class characters are, of course, capable of the same proactive reaction against and in tangent with the structures of their everyday lives, Carver's writings often deny their point of view. As a result, their activities often remain obscure or wholly inaccessible to the reader. Thus, gender adds another equally important dimension to be considered in tangent with the theoretical framework when problematizing Carver's working-class subjects.

In the Carver narratives of this chapter, gender is key to the ways characters reproduce structures through dynamic practices. In order to address this, Nussbaum and Goffman offer

valuable insights. In “They’re Not Your Husband” a reproduction of gender hierarchy is illuminated by Nussbaum’s explanation of objectification. She introduces it as a “pejorative term, connotating a way of speaking, thinking, and acting that the speaker finds morally of socially objectionable, usually, though, not always” (1995, 249). To elaborate, she argues that there are “different dimensions to objectification”, and that these aspects have an “independence from one another” (1995, 256). Her conception of “instrumentality” entails that the “objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes” (1995, 257). By extension, her explanation of “ownership” highlights how “[t]he objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.” (ibid.). In my reading of “They’re Not Your Husband” Nussbaum’s definition of these two dimensions to objectification help problematize the reproduction of harmful gender structures through practices.

“Neighbors” invites a more positive example of the reproduction of structures through practices, especially in relation to gender. In order to discuss this, I draw on Goffman’s portrayal of the everyday as a stage on which the individual aims to execute a believable, context-bound performance (1959, 17). In their aims to secure the plausibility of this performance, subjects don a “personal front” made out of “expressive equipment” such as “clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics [sic!]; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like” (Goffman 1959, 24). The outward context of the individuals’ performance constitutes a “‘setting’, constructed from furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it” (Goffman 1959, 22). Comparable to a stage, the setting provides a fixed arena which “stays put”, requiring that the subject limits their performance to this space, and in turn, that they conclude their act when they leave it (ibid.). This implies that individuals move through acts in the everyday, engaging in multiple roles connected to different spheres such as the home, the workplace, and arenas for recreation. These dramaturgical analogies are helpful as they invite a consideration of the self as dynamic, highly moldable, and never truly fixed. In “Neighbors”, Goffman’s theory can underline the fluid and anti-hierarchal treatment of gender in the narrative. This offers a juxtaposition to the dominating logic permeating practices in “They’re’ Not Your Husband”.

“They’re Not Your Husband”

In the opening of "They’re Not Your Husband" Earl visits the coffee-shop where his wife, Doreen, works as a waitress. He observes two businessmen perform a ritual, which in turn

serves as the nexus of the story. We can read this ritual as a resistance to the structure of their workplace. This defiance is initially suggested through Earl's description of the men: "[t]wo men in business suits, their ties undone, their collars open, sat down next to him and asked for coffee" (Carver 2009d, 18). The men don "business suits", a uniform undoubtedly mandated by their workplace. However, they have left their ties "undone" and their collars "open". The businessmen's loosening of their outfits signifies an alleviation of the boundaries set in place by the regulatory field of the workplace. Although they remain entrapped in garments they have not personally chosen, they have adjusted them to their liking and the relaxed context of the coffee shop.

Having established a more casual setting, the businessmen enact what can be read as a ritual consumption of Doreen's body. As noted above, De Certeau explains how the act of consumption initially appears like a passive process. Indeed, the businessmen seem passive in their seated position (18). Although ostensibly static, they engage in an active consumption of Doreen physical form through their gaze. Echoing De Certeau's analogy, her body can be likened to an image on a television screen. She is physically unavailable as she walks "away with the coffeepot" remaining untouchable yet observable from a distance (18). Like a broadcast cannot be visibly altered by the viewer, the businessmen cannot touch her from across the room. Still, the physical outline of her body appears to them like an object left vulnerable to their line of sight. In order to aid the process of consumption, the businessmen enact skills from their workplace.

This enactment is evident in the businessmen's creative appropriation of bargain-making, a skill they have likely mastered through their vocation:

> one of the men said to the other, "Look at the
> ass on that. I don't believe it."
>
> The other man laughed. "I've seen better," he said.
>
> "That's what I mean," the first man said. "But some jokers
> like their quim fat."
>
> "Not me," the other man said.
>
> "Not me, neither" the first man said. "That's what I was
> saying." (18)

In this example, the businessmen operate on De Certeau's two levels of ways of operating. On the first level, the structure of the bargain coincides with the regulatory field of the workplace, as an exchange of proposals passed back and forth between two parties. At the second level, the content of the bargain is manipulated and aimed at personal enjoyment rather than

corporate achievement. The first man lays the foundation for the bargain by stating, “look at the ass on that, I don’t believe it”. His statement functions as an open invitation, as it remains ambiguous what he cannot “believe”, though it establishes the sexual and disrespectful underpinnings of the proposed bargain. The second man chooses to accept the invitation and presents his own judgment by stating that he has “seen better”. Replying “not me, neither”, the first man eagerly underlines the second man's rejection, reflected through his use of double negation. Having reached an agreement on the desirability of Doreen's body, the businessmen effectively close the deal between them. In doing so, they separate themselves from the “jokers” and bond together.

Succeeding the collective judgment of Doreen's physical form, the ritual of the businessmen seems to build itself towards a sexually charged apex marked by a shared connection and voyeuristic pleasure through the consumption of Doreen’s image. At this climax, Doreen’s body is left vulnerable as she leans over to make an ice cream sundae:

> She reached down into the container and with
> the dipper began to scoop up the ice cream. The white skirt
> yanked against her hips and crawled up her legs. What showed
> was girdle, and it was pink, thighs that were rumpled and gray
> and a little hairy, and veins spread in a berserk display.
>
> The two men sitting beside Earl exchanged looks. One of them raised his eyebrows. The other man grinned and kept looking at Doreen over his cup as she spooned chocolate syrup over the ice cream. (18-19)

As Doreen’s skirt is “yanked” upwards, the intimate spheres of her body are invaded by the male gaze. The violence of this invasion is underlined by the detailed descriptions of her tights, their fuzz, veins, as well as their “rumpled” texture and “grey” color of the skin. As a response to the unveiling of Doreen’s body, the businessmen appear synchronized in their reaction. Their “exchanged” looks highlight this connection. As one has “raised eyebrows” and the other grins, their uniformly animated facial expressions reflect the voyeuristic pleasure they share. The businessmen have successfully completed their bargain-making, and now take pleasure in a unified consumption of Doreen’s image. In doing so, they playfully allow work and leisure to “flow together” (De Certeau 1988, 29). As underlined above, the ritual constitutes the core of the story. Earl's initial position as a bystander to the event, in turn, causes him to become proactive in his efforts to recreate it.

Earl's Tactics

One way to understand Earl's activation in the narrative is through De Certeau's conception of the tactic. As noted, tactics are highly mobile acts. Without any locus, they remain in constant motion, like rocks flung through space (De Certeau 1988, 37). Furthermore, tactics are always situated within and must be practiced in relation to "the space of the other" (ibid.). In the context of the story, the businessmen represent this foreign space because they arrange the framework of the ritual. In turn, Earl holds a weakened position as a bystander. As a result, he is effectively left out, both in relation to the arrangement of the businessmen's ritual, as well as the benefits reaped from it. In response to this exclusion, he begins to act with "tactic mobility" in order to recreate the businessmen's ritual (De Certeau 1988, 37). Consequently, we find Earl actively move within a preestablished terrain in his attempts to turn the situation to his advantage.

Before engaging directly with Earl's use of tactics, it is necessary to address how he initially appears static to the reader. The opening lines of the narrative portray him in a seemingly dormant state, reinforced by the portrayal of Doreen:

> Earl Ober was between jobs as a salesman. But Doreen,
> his wife, had gone to work nights as a waitress at a twenty-
> four-hour coffee shop at the edge of town. One night, when he
> was drinking, Earl decided to stop by the coffee shop and have
> something to eat. He wanted to see where Doreen worked,
> and he wanted to see if he could order something on the house.
> He sat at the counter and studied the menu. (18)

We learn that Earl is "between jobs as a salesman", the preposition "between" semantically suggesting that he is statically wedged between positions. His drinking emphases his inactivity, as it suggests that the void left by unemployment is challenging to fill with other productive activities. Furthermore, the economic restriction connected to Earl's dormant state looms in his tentative aim of ordering food "on the house". In opposition to Earl, Doreen appears dynamic. She works at "night", the unconventional hours suggesting a parallel effort to both care and provide for the family. Furthermore, her occupation as a "waitress" is dynamic in itself, as it requires continual movement around the coffee shop. Even the placement of her workplace at "the edge of town" suggests that she must commute to and from it, moving back and forth daily. Consequently, Doreen remains in continual movement, while Earl is left, figuratively and literally, sitting "at the counter". Earl's unemployment, possible substance abuse, and experience of economic restriction constitute a structural grid

within which he appears wholly cemented. However, as a response to the businessmen's ritual, he attempts to act dynamically.

Earl's use of mental tactics signifies the outset of his proactive movement in the story. After the businessmen's ritual, he retreats to his bedroom. Initially, we might discard this episode as a purely physical reaction to events Earl cannot understand the significance of. However, in my view, this passage marks the starting point of his active "reconstruction" of Doreen:

> He checked on the children and then went to the other bedroom and took off his clothes. He pulled the covers up, closed his eyes, and allowed himself to think. The feeling started in his face and worked down into his stomach and legs. He opened his eyes and rolled his head back and forth on the pillow. Then he turned on his side and fell asleep. (19)

This passage can be read as a tactical navigation through a physical response, which provides Earl with a sense of activation. He pulls the covers up and closes his eyes, and thus effectively barricades himself from the outside world. In this cocooned state, he allows himself to think, opening his internal self to reflection. The corresponding "feeling" is thus invited by Earl rather than him being overcome by it. The feeling moves through his body, descending from his face to his legs. This mobile trajectory causes it to appear like a force gaining momentum. When Earl opens his eyes as a response to the emotional sensation, it is as if he has awakened. These descriptions portray him using the physical response to the businessmen's ritual as a means for propulsion. Just as the feeling travels through him, Earl begins to move actively through the story in his efforts to alter Doreen's body.

In succession, Earl instigates a negotiation with Doreen in order to convince her to lose weight. This deal-making sequence contains a series of verbal tactics. Earl's first demand is to "[l]ook at yourself in the mirror" (19). In doing so, he rids himself of accountability, as he invites Doreen to judge herself. Cornwell underlines how this tactic is particularly sly, for Doreen's body faces not only the scrutiny of the businessmen and her husband but also that of "advertising" and "phantasmal mediators of cultural norms" (2005, 349). When she lifts her nightgown to scrutinize her "stomach" and "buttock", she effectively measures her body against society's rigid parameters for a woman's physical attractiveness (19-20). Doreen is quickly convinced she can "afford to lose", and in turn, Earl feels free to add verbal tactics, which coincide with her self-condemnation (20). Hidden under a ruse of empathy, he suggests "exercises" and to "just quit eating" (20). Finally, the negotiation between the Obers serves as

a verbal tactic in itself. It leads Doreen to perform a culturally informed self-debasement, and in turn, hides Earl's selfish motivations for her weight loss.

Turning to a more undisguised aspect of Earl's efforts to alter Doreen's body, we arrive at his employment of physical tactics. These augment the proactive nature of his behavior, but also prove particularly invasive to Doreen. This is demonstrated in his daily weighing and assessment of her weight-loss progression:

> Each morning he followed her into the bathroom and waited while she stepped onto the scale. He got down on his knees with a pencil and the piece of paper. The paper was covered with dates, days of the week, numbers. He read the number on the scale, consulted the paper, and either nodded his head or pursed his lips (22)

Earl's dynamic pursuit of Doreen into the intimate sphere of the bathroom underlines how he physically transgresses the boundaries between them, allowing himself to monitor her physical form. He eagerly gets "down on his knees" to record the numbers on the scale. Furthermore, he animates his head and face as he fluctuates between nods and pursed lips in accordance with the state of Doreen's weight. This passage demonstrates the severity of Earl's physical tactics as they involve a transgression of Doreen's body repeated "each morning". The paper used to monitor her weight is "covered with dates, days of the week, numbers", highlighting how this transgression is repeated over time. Through his use of physical tactics, Earl appears active in a literal sense, as he acts around and upon his wife. As with his use of mental and verbal tactics, his more concrete involvement in Doreen's weight-loss process illustrates his ruthless willingness to compromise her agency in his efforts to recreate the businessmen's ritual.

The Recreated Ritual

The circular arrangement of the narrative brings us back to the coffee shop as Earl aims to recreate the businessmen's ritual. This structure pointedly reveals how he has moved away from his initially static state. Now, he employs tactics aimed at an adjustment of past conditions. Even though he has "studied" the menu before (18), he now takes his time ordering (22). Instead of the ambiguous "Number Two" sandwich (18), Earl gets the more generic and decisive "cheeseburger" (22). Finally, he abandons his initial attempt to order something on the house, eliminating the possibility of rejection from Doreen (18). Less obvious is the fact that Earl has changed his role in the ritual. He is no longer to be a passive

observer but rather the instigator of its unfolding. Earl's actions serve as tactical tweaks to the events portrayed in the opening part of the narrative. As opposed to the initial scenario, he now enjoys a sense of control. When he has arranged the situation to feel just right, he initiates his own recreated ritual.

Earl's recreated ritual roughly follows the scheme initially conceived by the businessmen. However, his failure to find a suitable partner quickly leads it to unravel:

> "What do you think of that?" Earl said to the man, nodding at Doreen as she moved down the counter. "Don't you think that's something special?"
>
> The man looked up. He looked at Doreen and then at Earl, and then went back to his newspaper.
>
> "Well, What do you think?" Earl said. "I'm asking. Does it look good or not? Tell me."
>
> The man rattled the newspaper.
>
> When Doreen started down the counter again, Earl nudged the man's shoulder and said, "I'm telling you something. Listen. Look at the ass on her. Now you watch this now. Could I have a chocolate sundae?" Earl called to Doreen. (23)

Earl's referring to Doreen as "that" mimics the objectification the businessmen subject her to under their gaze, as she is presented as an image to be consumed. Furthermore, his inquiries as to whether Doreen appears "special" or "good" reflect a clumsy mirroring of the open invitation to bargain over the image. Earl furthers this mirroring when he repeats the vulgar and disrespectful jargon of the businessmen, asking the man to look at Doreen's behind. It is as if he believes the sexually charged word will have a mystical effect to the ritual, like a psalm or canticle. As if it was a ceremonial act, Earl has Doreen make another ice-cream sundae, leaving the intimate spheres of her body vulnerable to consumption once more as she leans over. However, his reconstruction is stunted, as his partner shields himself with a "newspaper" and refuses to partake in the consumption of Doreen's reconstructed image. Without a companion, Earl's ritual does not prove as satisfying to him as the businessmen's. Instead of experiencing a sense of unity and voyeuristic pleasure, his efforts to recreate the ritual effectively alienate him from the people around him.

Indeed, Earl's unsuccessful ritual cause both his wife and the patrons of the coffee shop to reject him, suggesting his inability to achieve a profound human connection both within and outside his marriage:

> Earl put on his best smile. He held it. He held it until he felt

his face pulling out of shape.

But the other waitress just studied him, and Doreen began to shake her head slowly. The man had put some change beside his cup and stood up, but he too waited to hear the answer. They all stared at Earl.

"He's a salesman. He's my husband." Doreen said at last, shrugging. Then she put the unfinished chocolate sundae in front of him and went to total up his check. (24)

Doreen's final statement is often subject to critical attention. The connotation between Earl's occupation as a "salesman" and his corresponding attempt to "sell" his wife is frequently highlighted, and we shall return to this point later on. However, as Cornwell suggests, Doreen's comment also serves to expose the insignificance both of Earl and the relationship between him and his wife (2005, 350). Her arrangement of Earl's titles with his vocation surpassing that of husband underlines his failure to achieve a human connection. Rather than exploring his marriage as an opportunity to nurture a sympathetic bond with another person, he has misused it as a means to satisfy his patriarchally informed desires. He appears similarly unsuccessful in his interactions with people outside his marriage, as his "best smile" serve only to pull his face "out of shape". This failing is further underlined by the patrons' collective rejection, as "[t]hey all stare[d] at Earl". Finally, Doreen's "unfinished" chocolate sundae becomes emblematic of this broken connection. It serves to reflect the collapse of the recreated ritual and by extension, the disintegration of unity between Earl, Doreen, and the coffee shop patrons. Despite its consequent failure, we are left to address other aspects of the ritual as we turn to Earl's class position.

Considering Earl's Class Position Through Bourdieu's Habitus

As with the businessmen's ritual, Earl's recreation can be read beyond a misguided attempt to achieve human connection. I have established how the first ritual constitutes a resistance to the regulatory field of their workplace. In turn, Earl's recreation demonstrates comparable defiance. In order to understand his ritual as a resistance to the structures in his everyday, we must scrutinize the implications of his class position further. As briefly mentioned above, Earl appears static in the opening lines of the story, as we are presented with a grid of issues that affect him daily. Economic strain, limited socioeconomic mobility, and gender roles serve as three potent examples of such structures. Firstly, we can consider Bourdieu's discussion of the "material conditions of existence characteristic of class condition" which make up habitus

(1977, 72). In the context of the narrative, these conditions are perhaps most overt in the segments concerning the economic situation of the Ober family.

For example, when Earl decides on the simple purchase of a “bathroom scale” he must first consult the “checking account” (20). The tight margins of the family economy are further augmented as Doreen’s weight loss leads her to need a new uniform, the purchase of which cuts into “rent money” (21). The strain of monetary restriction appears particularly evident in the manner Earl handles Doreen's tips, which constitute the primary income of the family. He carefully smooths out the “dollar bills” and stacks the “nickels, dimes, and quarters in piles of one dollar” (21). Earl’s rigid arrangement of the tips reflects his attempt to gain a sense of control against the fixed and suffocating presence of economic strain. Accordingly, the material conditions which inform his habitus as a working-class subject are marked by compromise, scarcity, or outright absence. In turn, they serve as a structure heavily imprinting the nature of Earl's every day.

Furthermore, Earl’s position as a working-class subject carries historical connotations that affect his possibility for socioeconomic mobility. Remembering the reproductive aspect of Bourdieu’s theory, the “objective conditions” which make up the habitus mandate “aspirations and practices objectively compatible with those objective requirements” (1977, 77). We see this reflected in the narrative, as Earl is left to act within the boundaries prescribed by his class. He reads the classifieds, attends the state employment office, and drives to job interviews (21). The sole interview he attends includes a browse of plumbing fixtures, and imply that the open position, just as that of a salesman, is blue-collar (20). In other words, these activities aim to conserve Earl’s working-class position, rather than transcend it. This has less to do with his ambitions, and more to do with the possibilities available to a person with his expertise, capital, and background. As noted above, the habitus is attuned to the possibilities connected to class, which have been established over time. Thus, the habitus establishes what we consider “reasonable practices” for a given subject (Bourdieu 1977, 78). Correspondingly, the historical lag of habitus serves as another structure in Earl’s life, which regulates and limits his socioeconomic mobility as a working-class subject.

A last, perhaps more covert, structure to consider in Earl’s life, is that of masculinity and the roles connected to it. The structure of gender roles is internalized in Earl's habitus, and in turn, informs his understanding of how they should or should not be performed. This understanding appears decidedly old fashioned, as Earl uses his patriarchal status as “husband” in order to justify the ill-treatment of his wife (22). Furthermore, Hall notes how he likely experiences his financial dependency on Doreen as a failure to “fulfill a traditional

husband's role" (Hall 2010, 180). To accentuate Earl's feeling of displacement in the marriage, he executes several tasks archaically associated with wifely duties, such as doing the "shopping" and putting the "children to bed" (22). As a result, there is a dissonance between Earl's idea of "correct" masculinity perceived through the prism of his habitus and the division of labor within his marriage. Hall notes how this dissonance leads to an experience of "fragile masculinity" (2010, 180). As with the looming pressure of Earl's limited material conditions, and the socioeconomic mobility available to him as a working-class subject, his archaic notion of masculinity serves as yet another structure within which he finds himself entrapped.

Correspondingly, the businessmen appear emblematic of the very structures that limit Earl in his everyday life. Therefore, his recreation of the ritual serves as an attempted rite of passage in the class system. Returning to the businessmen's attire, their loosened "suits", "ties" and "collars" serve not only as signifiers of resistance but also of decorum (18). Firstly, their professional clothing reflects an abundance of resources available through their material conditions. Furthermore, they enjoy a higher chance for social mobility through their managerial position, which is also signified through professional workwear. Lastly, the suit and its accessories effectively serve as markers of the businessmen's masculinity. Their attire likely corresponds with Earl's archaic understanding of what it means to be a man. In short, the businessmen symbolize a success that is antithetical to Earl's experience within the structural matrix as a working-class subject. In his efforts to participate in the unity and voyeuristic pleasure the businessmen enjoy, he aims to carve out an imaginary space where he can transcend his position in the class hierarchy and join their ranks. This elevation holds the promise of resistance to the structures which usually entrap him. Consequently, the duplicate rituals symbolize how the men in the story act dynamically in their efforts to resist the structures in their everyday. However, both rituals hinge on a sexist objectification of Doreen. We, therefore, arrive at a dilemma, for the men use their rituals as a means of resistance to the structures in their lives, but in turn, they reproduce the structure of gender hierarchy

Objectification: Reproduction of the Gender Hierarchy

Earl's attempted rite of passage is complicated by Bourdieu's view of capital as the foundation of the "unconscious unity of class" (1984, 47). When it comes to material possessions, we know Earl's economic situation is strained. In terms of cultural capital, the discrepancy between him and the likely middle-class businessmen might not be as large. Still, his aims to join their ranks is potentially hindered by the differing composition of their

habitus. Here, objectification provides a tool for the harmonization of experience between the men, which correspondingly leads to the reproduction of gender structures. Nussbaum defines objectification as the "making into a thing, treating *as* a thing, something that is really not a thing" (1995, 257). In the story, critics have noted that Earl reduces Doreen to an 2object of his desire" (Cornwell 2005, 348). As Hall adds, to Earl, the "two businessmen insult both his wife (her figure) and him (his taste in women)" (2010, 180). In line with this reading, Doreen becomes a signifier of ideas in her objectified state. Earl does not reject this problematic reduction, striving instead to affirm the businessmen's objectification in an effort to mimic them. As a result, Doreen is reduced to an image serving as a bridge between the men's differing habitus. They become united in their shared perception of her as an insufficient object. In turn, this communal rejection effectively perpetuates male dominance over the female form.

This chauvinist dynamic is further pronounced in Earl's interactions with Doreen. His behavior coincides with Nussbaum's conception of instrumentality, where the "objectifier treats the object as a tool for his or her purposes" (1995, 257). In the context of the story, Earl's purpose is to create an object deemed desirable to the businessmen. This purpose is made explicit in the negotiation between the couple:

> "What are you saying?" she said.
>
> "Just what I said. I think you could lose a few pounds. A few pounds, anyway," he said.
>
> "You never said anything before," she said. She raised her nightgown over her hips and turned to look at her stomach in the mirror.
>
> "I never felt it was a problem before," he said. (19)

What is quintessential in this conversation concerning instrumentality, is the emphasis on a "before". Earl did not feel that Doreen's body was insufficient before he observed the businessmen's ritual. Now, he views her body as problematic because the businessmen have deemed her unattractive. This change of heart demonstrates Earl's direct reproduction of their objectification. He has assumed, and in turn, commits to their chauvinist view of the parameters of attractiveness for the female form. Furthermore, his request for Doreen to lose a "few pounds" reflects his willingness to reduce her to an instrument aimed at the appeasement of the businessmen's implied preference. This is further highlighted in his more direct treatment of Doreen's body.

As Earl aims to alter Doreen's physique, he literally treats her like a tool. When she succeeds in losing weight, he pats her on the hip (21). When she diverges and allows herself scrambled eggs and bacon, he angrily calls her a "slob" (21). In these examples, Earl is reproducing the businessmen's objectification of Doreen in a literal sense. As if she was a moldable material, he is seeking to shape and sculpture her image in line with their preferences. The strain of this treatment is destructive, as we learn that "Doreen spent more time in bed now. She went back to bed after the children had left for school, and she napped in the afternoons before going to work" (22). Doreen's retreat to the bed demonstrates how Earl's efforts cause her to enter an object-like state, preserved and static in her bed rest.

The process of objectification reaches its apogee at the story's conclusion, when Earl attempts to "sell" the image of his wife. The act of selling brings us to the exercise of ownership (Nussbaum 1995, 257). As also noted previously, this mandates that "[t]he objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc." (Nussbaum 1995, 257). Indeed, critics often underline how Earl acts like a salesman in the narrative. As stressed by Cornwell, his efforts to draw attention to Doreen at the story's conclusion reveals how he acts like a salesman trying to "establish the value of his merchandise by convincing another to buy it" (2005, 349-350). Through his use of tactics, Earl has altered Doreen's physical form, and in turn, aims to sell the reconstructed image of his wife. This latter type of objectification captures the essence of the story. In a modern capitalist society, the male characters reduce the female form to an object which communicates value in their attempts to push back against the economic and social structures which entrap their daily lives. In their efforts to alleviate themselves from this structural entrapment, they effectively push the female character further down the ladder of oppression, leading to a harmful reproduction of the gender hierarchy.

Subsequently, sexist objectification remains a central and often overtly signified theme in the story. Because the businessmen and Earl's chauvinism is so pronounced, critics often defend the narrative as a parodic take on outdated masculinity. Vanessa Hall underlines how Earl is made out to signify an understanding of masculinity that is "controlling" and "outdated" (2010, 181). Accordingly, his character appears designed to "provoke laughter and suspicion" rather than respect (ibid.). This observation seems particularly evident at the story's conclusion, where Earl grows desperate in his attempts to draw attention to Doreen. John Magee deems this last sequence as a hectic "commotion" (1995, 180) and Cornwell, a "voyeuristic spectacle" (2005, 349). As Magee elaborates, Earl fears that he appears to others as a "joker" (Magee 1995, 180). However, his frantic attempts to gain approval through

Doreen only serves to confirm the judgment he tries to avoid. At the story's conclusion, he does indeed appear like a joke. The unfolding of events also implies that the story presents Earl's sexist understanding of masculinity, marriage, and women as archaic and tragicomic.

However, I argue that the parodic effect of the story remains dubious due to the narratives' near absent attention to Doreen's point of view. Carver's consideration of female voices remains an issue in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, and I address this more fully in the third chapter. In relation to Doreen, we are denied adequate access to her reflections, thoughts, and actions, despite her physical appearance functioning as a central element by which the narrative gains momentum. As a result, we cannot analyze her activities as dynamic acts of resistance and reproduction, as is possible with the male characters. Parody or not, the opacity of her voice constitutes a restriction that, in turn, leaves her vulnerable to the male transgressions in the narrative. The lack of female perspective in "They're Not Your Husband" echoes the absence of gender in De Certeau1s discourse on the efforts of the oppressed to resist its oppressors. It also coincides with Bourdieu's more direct connection of rituals to the "male world" as a means for patriarchal "men's assembly" (1977, 89). This goes to show how theory concerned with oppressive dynamics often miss out on the complexity of power structures. For Doreen, her gender adds a stratification to her position as a working-class subject which cannot be ignored. Indeed, this complexity is evident in the twofold coercion she faces; just as Doreen is excluded from the benefit of the male rituals through objectification, the narrative itself mimics this exclusion. Consequently, the effect of the story serves not as a parodic attack on masculinity. Instead, it seems guilty of the very reproduction of the gender hierarchy it aims to ridicule. Ultimately, the story appears just as sexist as Earl and the businessmen.

This sentiment also ties back to the success of the rituals in "They're Not Your Husband" as a whole. These ceremonies remain an important aspect of Carver's working-class representation because they showcase how his ostensibly static characters are in fact acting dynamically. However, the tools through which his male subjects become active prove problematic, as they hinge on a sexist objectification of Doreen. Therefore, the rituals above present a dichotomy in their effect, for they serve as a resistance to structures, but also reproduce the structure of gender hierarchy. In the case of Earl, reproduction serves to collapse his attempts for alleviation. Because his ritual hinges on the oppression of his wife, he only reaffirms the dominating effect of the structural grid he tries to escape. As a result, he severs any meaningful human connection to those around him. The notion of destructive reproduction is further reflected in the narrative itself, as it fails to provide Doreen with a

voice. This goes to show how De Certeau's optimistic view of the everyday as an arena for resistance needs to be handled with nuance. By adding Bourdieu's insight of habitus, the everyday of the characters appears as a complex arena housing the potential of the resistance to and reproduction of structures. Finally, our ability to consider Carver's literary subjects through the insight provided by this conjoined theoretical framework is also a site of contention. The efficiency of this theoretical approach is stunted by the limitations in Carver's gender inclusivity. Still, I argue that we reconsider the working-class characters that do receive a voice in his narratives. Their activities within the structural matrix of the everyday are not unproblematic or worth blindly celebrating. However, their actions remain decidedly dynamic.

"Neighbors"

To add some nuance to this sentiment, I wish to offer a more positive reading of rituals as we turn to "Neighbors". The narrative introduces Bill and Arlene Miller who watch the neighboring Jim and Harriet Stone's apartment. Soon, the Millers find themselves irresistibly drawn to the creative possibilities presented by the vacant household. Boxer and Phillips have noted how the Millers' visits to the Stone apartment can be seen as a performance. In their view, this performance is a direct mirroring of the Stones, with the Millers "shedding their own dull skins for the bright feathers of their neighbors" (1979, 76). In my view, Bill's act surpasses that of a forthright mimicking. The same can likely be said for Arlene; however, we never receive a detailed description of her activities in the apartment and are thus left to focus on her husband. As noted above, Goffman offers a definition of the self as capable of moving through different performances in the everyday. As he sees it, individuals have a highly flexible identity, which can be altered in relation to various contexts. In line with Goffman's argument, we can view Bill's visits to the Stone apartment as a ritual marked by a performance, not precisely as the Stones, but as a flexible character capable of moving through different personal fronts. When Bill enacts his ritual, he experiences himself as completely free and effectively pushes back on the structural grid of his everyday. This sentiment connects to Boxer and Philips' conception of disassociation as "disengagement from one's own identity and life, a state of standing apart from whatever defines the self, or of being unselfed" (1979, 75). Ultimately, my analysis moves beyond a recurring point made by critics, mandating that "the apartment and its contents have become a metonymy for the Stones themselves" (Cornwell 2005, 350). As we turn to consider the homogeneity between the neighbors in terms of capital, I suggest that the meaning of Stone apartment is more

complex. What the Millers crave from the Stones is not their personas, but rather their flexible relationship to the structures of their everyday.

The opening lines of the narrative portray the broad strokes of the Millers' working-class lives. They seem to experience a sense of immobility comparable to the initial description of Earl Ober. In this story, the workplace serves as a pivotal structure in the Millers' everyday:

> Bill and Arlene Miller were a happy couple. But now and then they felt they alone among their circle had been passed by somehow, leaving Bill to attend to his bookkeeping duties and Arlene occupied with secretarial chores. They talked about it sometimes, mostly in comparison with the lives of their neighbors, Harriet and Jim stone. It seemed to the Millers that the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life. (Carver 2009b, 8)

Although Bill and Arlene are happy, they also feel stuck. This is reflected in their experience of being "passed by". The Millers consider their position as static, leaving them to watch while their "circle" moves past and beyond them. By extension, this passage also suggests that the workplace lies at the root of their perception of immobility. The presentation of the Millers' vocations as the primary indicator of their daily activities underlines the workplace as a dominating presence. Furthermore, work is portrayed as a burdensome activity for the couple. Bill's "bookkeeping" is not exciting nor fulfilling, but rather involves a series of "duties". Similarly, Arlene's job as a secretary appears onerous, as it is made up of "chores". Rather than offering an arena for self-fulfillment, work appears as a restrictive and dominating structure in Millers' day to day.

In addition, the passage above effectively establishes the Millers' glorified perception of the neighboring Stones. However, the adjectives "fuller" and "brighter" do not reveal exactly what makes Jim and Harriet's lives desirable. Revisiting Bourdieu's economic capital to consider the possibility of class position, the members of the adjacent families seem to share a similar habitus. As with Bill's bookkeeping, Jim's job as a "salesman for a machine-parts firm" is also blue-collar (8). No form of paid work is mentioned for Harriet, the absence of which suggesting that she is a home-maker. Finally, the Stones and Millers live in the same apartment building. As a result, their homes likely share a similar size and layout. The communal quality of this living arrangement implies a socioeconomic homogeneity between the families, and in turn, a similar frame of reference informing their habitus. This

homogeneity suggests that the lives of the Stones do not appeal to the Millers due to a heightened class position.

Instead, I argue the Stones' existence appears "fuller" and "brighter" to the Millers because they enjoy a more mobile and flexible relationship to the structures in their everyday. This is suggested by the Millers' perception of the Stones activities:

> The Stones were always going out for dinner, or entertaining at home, or traveling about the country somewhere in connection to Jim's work.
>
> The Stones lived across the hall from the Millers. Jim was a salesman for a machine-parts firm and often managed to combine business with pleasure trips, and on this occasion the Stones would be away for ten days, first to Cheyenne, then on to St. Louis to visit relatives. In their absence, the Millers would look after the Stones' apartment, feed Kitty, and water the plants. (8)

As opposed to the Millers who feel passed by, the Stones are in continual movement. Bill and Arlene experience their neighbors as constantly "going", "entertaining" and "traveling", with the dynamic tense of the verbs underlining their motion. The activity of travel poses a salient example in terms of resistance to structures. Although work likely predominates the everyday of the Stones, who are also blue-collar, they enjoy the possibility of merging "business with pleasure trips". This line is reminiscent of De Certeau's conception of *la perruque*, as the Stones use and imprint activities mandated by the overarching structure of the workplace. Consequently, their conjoining of business and pleasure constitutes a way of operating. Although travel is required through Jim's job, the family turns this requirement into an advantage. They use the trips as a means to gain a sense of mobility, a chance both to see new places and "visit relatives". Through this twofold dynamic, the Stones enjoy a more pliant relationship to the structure of the workplace. On the whole, it appears as if Jim and Harriet move more freely within the structures to which the Millers feel completely confined. However, the "absence" left by the Stones, embodied in their unoccupied residence, leaves a crux to the Millers by which they find their own ways of operating.

Bill's Ritual: Setting, Shedding the Self, and Moving Through Personal Fronts

The Stone apartment coincides with Goffman's description of the setting as a constructed and defined sphere, where the residence holds the imaginary potential of a theatrical stage. As discussed above, the home is an apartment, and evidently presents a small and

compartmentalized space. This secures a “highly bounded region” within which Bill’s ritual can take place (Goffman 1959, 107). In addition, the inside of the Stone apartment appears otherworldly. Bill notes that the air is “heavy” and “vaguely sweet” (9). Later on, he feels as if the home is “cooler” and “darker” compared to his apartment (11). He even wonders if “the plants had something to do with the temperature of the air” (11). Bill’s precise observations of ventilation, temperature, and light portray the Stone household as a microcosm. Like the stage opens up a plethora of imaginary possibilities to the actor, the apartment offers Bill a “different world” within which he can take center stage and perform his ritual (Boxer and Phillips 1979, 75). To augment this perception, his performance in the space is foreshadowed upon his first entering, where he takes a “deep breath”, like an actor stepping out from behind the curtain (9).

The notion of the Stone apartment as a stage, an open space reserved for a creative play, underlines its function as an arena where Bill can shed his persona and move more freely. This sentiment brings us back to De Certeau’s tactics. Once Bill finds himself within the Stone residence, he is literally confined to “the space of the other” (De Certeau 1988, 37). In the narrative, it is exactly the impersonal nature of the setting that allows Bill to turn the field to his advantage. Because the Stone home is distinctly removed from his ownership, it is easy for him to enact his ritual, which depends on a shedding of the self. Propelled by the advantage provided by the setting, Bill’s movements in the Stone residence take on a tactical nature. Because his ritual involves a flexible movement through personal fronts, his actions, like Earl’s, mirror De Certeau's analogy of rocks flung through space (De Certeau 1988, 37). Through his performance, Bill deserts any restrictive locus and dynamically engages in a creative and free play.

We can understand Bill’s emancipation better if we return to Goffman. He argues that “a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability” (1959, 27). This mandates that for Bill, his role in the everyday, as a working-class subject, a husband and a man, all include a set of limiting expectations, indeed structures, which entrap him. The discussion of the workplace above already serves to demonstrate how these structures weigh on him. Accordingly, the first enactment of his ritual demonstrates how Bill deserts his everyday personal front by use of the bathroom mirror:

> Leaving the cat to pick at her food, he headed for
> the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror and then

> closed his eyes and looked again. He opened the medi-
> cine chest. He found a container of pills and read the label –
> *Harriet Stone. One each day as directed* – and slipped it into his
> pocket. (9)

As Bill looks at his reflection, closes his eyes, and looks anew, it appears as if he has reset himself. There is no description of the person looking back from the mirror after he glances his reflection "again". This absence suggests that the person staring back is no longer Bill Miller, but rather a nobody; a flexible, nameless character. The notion that Bill has moved away from his personal front, and is now free, is further suggested as he slips a "container of pills" into his pocket. This transgression, the taking of something that does not belong to him, suggests the limitless nature of his character. Indeed, critics have noted how the "mirror is an emblem of Carverian disassociation" possessive of a "disconcerting capacity of making one a stranger to oneself" (Boxer and Phillips 1979, 77). In this story, however, the mirror serves as a tool for liberation. It provides Bill with an understanding of the self as flexible and moldable. Accordingly, the mirror scene marks one aspect of Bill's ritual.

The most important aspect of Bill's ritual is his dynamic movement through personal fronts. This motion is demonstrated in his last visit to the Stone apartment, where he plays dress-up. Reaching into the Stones' closet, he puts on a "Hawaiian shirt", "Bermudas" and "brown twill slacks" (11). Critics often read the outfit as symbolic. Cornwell suggests that Bill dresses in the men's clothes because he feels as if he "has momentarily become Jim Stone" (2005, 350). This is a fair observation, as Bill literally "shed[s]" his personal front in favor of a costume that is emblematic of the qualities he envies in Jim Stone (11). The casual clothes constitute a uniform connected to leisure, and echo Arlene's longing statement in the story's introduction: "God knows, we could use a vacation" (8). As Harker argues, when Bill helps himself to a drink while donning the outfit, it is as if he creates an imaginary vacation inside the Stone residence (2007, 722). Still, he soon changes into a "blue shirt", "dark suit", "blue and white tie" complete with "black wing-tip shoes" (11). Because this is a distinctly formal outfit, we are invited to consider the dress-up séance further. The polar opposites presented by the outfits, accompanied by the ease in which Bill moves between them, demonstrates the flexibility of his nameless character. He is not necessarily pretending to be Bill Stone. Instead, his ritual involves a dynamic movement through personal fronts.

The notion of the dress-up as a demonstration of the flexibility of Bill's ritual, rather than a straightforward mirroring, is augmented as he reaches into Harriet's side of the closet and puts on women's clothes. I see this act as particularly important, as it challenges the rigid

frames and oppositions mandated by the social construction of gender. When Bill puts on Harriet's clothes, his nameless character appears totally free, effectively exploding the boundaries prescribed by this construction. The ease of Bill's transgression is reflected in the complete transformation issued through the dress-up. He even puts on Harriet's "brassiere" and "panties", garments that are both intimate and gender bound through societal norms (11). Although the skirt is difficult to zip and the shoes "w[ill] not fit", these restrictions are not connected to a perception of the clothes as forbidden or inappropriate (11). The inaccessibility of these garments is strictly logical, as they connect to dimension and size. Indeed, Bill never seems to experiences his outfitting as taboo. He appears comfortable as he stands for a "long time" peering through the living room window (11). As with the prior outfits, Boxer and Phillips view Bill's dressing in women's clothes as a mirroring, through which "he's looking at the world as a different person, Harriet Stone, might" (1979, 77). In my view, the episode speaks more towards the playful and nonrestrictive nature of his ritual. His ceremony offers a positive opposition to Earl's ritual, which depends on sexist categorizations of men and their treatment of the female form. Here, Bill challenges the gender-hierarchy as he assumes the position of a woman.

In my view, the challenge Bill poses to conservative gender-expectations encapsulates the nature of his ritual. His free movement through personal fronts demonstrates a flexibility which affords his ceremony's efficiency as a resistance to structures. In contrast to his everyday role as Bill Miller, which appears particularly confined within the structure of the workplace, his nameless character faces no restriction whatsoever. Propelled by the mystical, delaminated, and non-personal setting offered by the Stone apartment, Bill's act embodies completely free and creative play. As opposed to Earl's destructive objectification of Doreen in "They're Not Your Husband", the moldable material at hand in "Neighbors" is Bill himself. He chooses to base his ritual on anti-hierarchal and anti-categorical ideals, as seen particularly well in his performance moving through, rather than in line with, gender. Indeed, this demonstrates how gender remains intrinsic to the rituals in both Carver narratives. In the first story, Earl perpetrates an archaic opposition of masculinity and femininity, which only serves to reaffirm the hierarchal power structures. In the ladder example, Bill transgresses the boundaries of gender, and thus creates an imaginative space in the Stone apartment based on freedom. As I see it, this is intrinsic to the success of Bill's ritual. Furthermore, it proves beneficial to his everyday as a whole.

The Significance of Bill's Ritual for the Millers' Everyday

To elaborate on these benefits, we can consider how Bill's ritual seems to pave the way for other ways of operating in his day-to-day. This is easily overlooked, as the segments of the story which do not take place in the Stone apartment are shorter, more stripped-down, and marked by frequent dialogue. As a result, critics tend to percept these segments as forlorn and dreary. Boxer and Phillips read the narrative as concerned with "two rather hollow and thoroughly 'average' people" who find that "[t]he old life on one side of the hall seems more dissatisfying than ever, but the new life is on the other side of a locked door" (1979, 77). It may well be that the everyday of the Millers remains "thoroughly 'average'". However, their old life is not portrayed as "dissatisfying", but rather improved after the ritual. For example, we now find Bill defying the initially all-encompassing structure of his workplace. After his first ritual, he takes "only ten minutes of the twenty minute break allotted for the afternoon and le[aves] at fifteen minutes before five" (9). Later on, he allows himself a day off altogether (10). In the free time he gains through this active pushback, he engages in recreational activities such as reading a book and going for a walk (10,11). Furthermore, Bill begins to connect with Arlene. After another of his visits to the Stones, the couple "sent out for Chinese food, and when it arrived they ate hungrily, without speaking, and listened to records" (10). Here, the Millers' sharing silence, food, and music portray them bonding closer through small acts, ways of operating, which in turn serve to infuse their everyday with meaning and richness.

Secondly, as Boxer and Phillips write "the Millers' sex life catches fire, but only because of the fantasies they project themselves in the apartment across the hall" (1979, 77). In my view, we can read their sexual awakening as more than a reaction to the Stone apartment as a mutual fetish. Like the shared moment described above, the increased intimacy between the couple suggest that their love has been rejuvenated. This is demonstrated in the sensual and playful spontaneity issued by the rituals:

> He waited until she entered the
> building, then ran up the stairs to catch her as she stepped out
> of the elevator.
>
> "Bill! God, you scared me. You're early," she said.
>
> He shrugged. "Nothing to do at work," he said.
>
> She let him use her key to open the door. He looked at the
> door across the hall before following her inside.
>
> "Let's go to bed," he said.
>
> "Now?" She laughed. "What's gotten into you?"
>
> "Nothing. Take your dress off." He grabbed for her awk-
> wardly, and she said "Good God Bill."

He unfastened his belt. (9-10)

In this passage, Arlene's surprise suggests that this type of spontaneity from her partner is unusual. However, her laugh hints to the playfulness of the situation, and a reciprocal enjoyment. Later on, mutual satisfaction is further suggested, as the Millers "made love again" (10). The description of their intimacy as lovemaking underlines a twofold connection, both of the corporal and emotional kind. Indeed, towards the end of the story, Bill and Arlene appear freshly connected, like lovesick teenagers: "[h]e was not hungry. She did not eat much either. They looked at each other shyly and smiled" (12). Here, the shy looks highlight the newfound vitality in the marriage, which makes it excitingly unfamiliar. The smiles, like Arlene's previous laugh, augment the playful aspect of this rejuvenation. Finally, their lack of appetite signifies shared satisfaction. At this moment, the Millers crave something else, namely the setting of the Stone apartment.

This leads us to the conclusion of the story, which builds toward, but ultimately denies, a united ritual where both Bill and Arlene perform. Although they find themselves locked out of the Stone apartment, the narrative still holds the promise of continued resistance to structures, abetted by the strong bond between the couple:

> They held hands for the short walk across the hall, and when he spoke she could barely hear his voice.
>
> "The key," he said. "Give it to me."
>
> "What?" She said. She gazed at the door.
>
> "The key," he said. "You have the key."
>
> "My God," she said, "I left the key inside."
>
> He tried the knob. It was locked. Then she tried the knob. It would not turn. Her lips were parted, and her breathing was hard, expectant. He opened his arms and she moved into them.
>
> "Don't worry," he said into her ear. "For God's sake, don't worry."
>
> They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves. (13)

Critics typically view this concluding segment as a discouraging anticlimax. Boxer and Phillips claim that the "Millers have only each other" and that the "link" between them is "very tenuous" (1979, 77). Ultimately, they face "an ill wind despite the couples touching moment of closeness" (ibid.). It is true that the locked door generates disappointment in the Millers. Offering a mysterious and detached setting, the Stone apartment has provided a crux for a resistance to structures through the ritual. However, having considered the positive

effect of the ritual on the Millers' everyday as a whole, I would suggest that they now have the tools required to leave this crux behind. Although they are locked out of the Stone household, they still have food, music, sex, and the promise of their strengthened connection. They have discovered ways of operating that exist separate from the space of the Stones, and in turn, offer equally salient avenues for a resistance to structures. This unification is underlined as Bill "open[s]" his arms, and Arlene willingly "move[s] into them". Bill emphatically consoles his wife, rather than accusing her for losing the key. As the Millers hold "each other", and "brace[ed]" themselves, they appear strongly unified, as if shielded by their reciprocal love. The "wind" they lean against signals the challenges of their working-class lives, and surely, existence for the Millers will not always be easy. However, they have each other, as underlined by their embrace. In my view, it is this communal struggle against hardship, rather than the wind itself, that remains important.

Narrative Focus: Reproduction of a Gender Disequilibrium

Although I argue that "Neighbors" offers a positive interpretation of rituals as opposed to "They're Not Your Husband", I still wish to address how the gender issue prevails in this story as well. The limited narrative perspective offered from Arlene's point of view poses a disequilibrium between the characters. We understand she also enters the Stone apartment, but never get to follow her inside. There are several hints which suggest that her actions within the neighboring home are similar to Bill's. For example, time slips away from Arlene while in the Stone residence. We see this as she perplexedly asks "[w]as I gone so long?" upon Bill's questioning her absence (12). Her surprise mirrors that of her husband at an earlier point in the narrative, where he asks "[h]ave I really?" as Arlene's enquires why he has been gone for "more than an hour" (10). Later on, Arlene says she has "found some pictures", suggesting that she, like Bill's looting of the pill container, has interacted with the setting if the apartment (12). More overtly, Arlene comes close to formulating the profound effect of the Stone apartment, as she tells Bill "It's funny…You know—to go into someone's place like that" (12). Cornwell notes that, here, she is speaking more "truly than perhaps she realizes" as she addresses the "validating charge of desire produced by "go[ing] in someone [else]'s place." (2005, 351). Arlene's line proves particularly important, not only because it shows how her experience in the Stone apartment is similar to that of her husband. It also underlines her emotional capacity, as it offers a rare unveiling of her inner reflections. In my view, this brief glimpse of Arlene's inner life is paramount as it affirms how her complexity is equal to that of the male main character. This means that the limited insight we gain into her

thoughts and feelings has nothing to do with a stunted ability to grasp profound experiences. Instead, it relates to a narrative bias which favors the perspective of male subjects.

Furthering the problematic narrative treatment of Arlene, her connection to the Stone apartment is often signified through her body. As Cornwell noes, "her experience in the apartment is even more overtly sexual" compared to that of Bill (2005, 350). When she returns from a visit to the Stone residence, her husband notes "white lint clinging to the back of her sweater" and that "color was high in her cheeks" (12). Seeing as the Stones' bed has "a fluffy white bedspread" (10) the "white lint" on Arlene's back suggests she has been laying on it. Paired with her flushed complexion, it offers an allusion to masturbation. Later on, Arlene's body again becomes the signifier of her connection to the Stone home. As the Millers stand outside the locked apartment, it is her "parted" lips and "hard" breathing rather than vocal cues that underline her excitement (13). Arlene's physical reactions, nor their sexual nature, are problematic on their own. However, Bill is never described in the same manner, and by extension, receives the benefit of a more nuanced rendering offered by the narrative perspective. As a result, the fixation on Arlene's physique appears unequal and gendered. In these examples, the narrative uses her body to communicate ideas about the Stone apartment, echoing the various ways Doreen's objectified image is exploited throughout "They're Not Your Husband".

Indeed, for readers concerned with Arlene as female working-class character, the narrative focus of the text leaves us, like the Millers, outside a locked door. We know that Arlene possesses an emotional capacity that is at least equal to that of her husband. Still, the narrative effectively excludes us from fully understanding her reflections, offering mostly obscure and exterior clues for our consideration. This proves a fitting sentiment for Carver's gender inclusivity in general. His narratives present a serious effort to portray and represent female characters, but do not fully disentangle from gender tropes. In other words, his female subjects play an important role, yet rarely access the center stage to fulfill it. As a biproduct of this narrative bias, Carver's female subjects often become vulnerable to a corporal fixation to which his male characters appear absolved. Lastly, the limited attention placed on Carver's literary women frustratingly impedes an analysis of their ways of operating that is equal to the readings made possible for more fleshed out male characters. Overall, "Neighbors" reproduces a gender hierarchy, covertly, through its narrative focus. In my view, this dilemma remains a shortcoming to be noted in Carver's literary working-class representation.

Conclusion

This chapter has reconsidered the notion of mobility for the working-class characters in "They're Not Your Husband" and "Neighbors". In order to parry reductive critical readings of the subjects in these narratives, I have underlined the dynamic quality of their everyday practices. In line with the thoughts of De Certeau and Bourdieu, some of these practices have been isolated, framed, and interpreted as rituals. As I see it, the characters use their rituals as tools to resist the structures entrapping them in their everyday lives. Furthermore, these ceremonies invite problematization due to their reproductive nature. In my view, this nuance is key in order to avert a credulous heightening or celebration of practices. Instead, my goal in this chapter has been to underline how Carver's working-class subjects are active, despite their fixed position within the structural grid of their everyday.

As I see it, these narratives present two opposites, which in turn highlight the complexity of the characters' resistance to and reproduction of structures. The first story, fueled by its attempted satire, presents overtly toxic masculinity, where the male characters execute rituals that hinge on a sexist objectification. The endgame is destructive, particularly for Doreen. This harmful propagation continues through the narrative's negligence of her point of view. In contrast, the latter story leaves us with a more positive perception of Bill's ritual. Its highly flexible nature holds the promise of a positive reproduction, one that, particularly reflected in his challenging of the social constructs of gender, embodies an anti-hieratical and anti-categorical view of the world and its subjects. The positive aspects of Bill's ritual are further underlined by its proactive effect on the Millers' everyday. It paves the way for other ways of operating and ultimately forges a strong bond between the couple. Still, the limitations of Carver's gender-inclusivity remain problematic, and should be kept in mind.

What both of these short-stories have in common, however, is an apt demonstration of the dynamic operations of the working-class characters within the structural grid of the everyday. While the male characters in "They're Not You Husband" appear active through the acts which make up their objectifying ceremonies, Bill Miller in "Neighbors" remains in motion through his performance as a flexible character. This observation pushes back against critics' view of these characters as static, dormant, or cemented. My aim has been to underline how Carver's subjects, despite their disadvantageous class-position, have a capacity to express, resist, and reproduce. Although I challenge the detrimental aspects of previous scholarly discourse, I do not aim to celebrate or heighten the characters, nor their fictitious working-class existence. As we have seen, the struggles they face are not unimportant, nor is it fair to argue that the activities underlined function as a satisfactory replacement for

socioeconomic mobility. In line with everyday life scholarship, I concur that we should "avoid romanticizing or disparaging either the expressive practices of everyday life or those of special events" (Del Negro and Berger 2004, 21). As I see it, the aim of academic discourses on the proletariat should be to take its subjects seriously. This ambition entails a nuanced approach which takes into account both the positive and negative aspects of a given issue.

Finally, I want to address how my analysis in this chapter might be seen as falling outside the everyday. Felski notes how a reading informed by De Certeau's *Practice* "often loses sight of the mundane, taken-for-granted, routine qualities that seem so central to its definition—the very everydayness of the everyday" (2000a, 80). Indeed, my understanding of rituals in both narratives hinge on a certain escapism. Earl is engaging in an imaginary rite of passage in the class hierarchy in order to combat his experience of insufficiency within the structural grid. Similarly, Bill uses his neighbors' apartment as the stage for a ritual which embodies the flexibility he longs for in the everyday. As a result, the characters' practices could be seen as moving away from what they perceive as ordinary. This would entail that the space of resistance and reproduction is somehow heightened or abstracted from the everyday. In my view, Felski's argument is important, as it underlines to the problematic notion of the everyday as a definable concept. This leads us to question how we can ever determine what is ordinary and what is not.

As Lisl Olson states, "[t]he paradox can be put this way: to say *this is ordinary* is to give significance to what is insignificant" and pertinently asks "[h]ow do we discuss the ordinary when by its very nature it should remain overlooked" (2011, 176). Her argument suggests that once a specific episode from the everyday is isolated in order to analyze its meaning, it takes on a specialized quality. Intuitively, this steals us away from the realm of everyday life. Not only does this mean the concept of everydayness remains elusive and hard to define, but our expectations of a mundanity to this realm makes it difficult to resolve with the anticipations we have of short fiction as a genre. Olson's paradox prevails in Carver's texts, for the extraction of specific incidents is a staple of the short story. As Daniel Just notes, "[t]o avoid simply presenting a meaningless "slice of life," the [short] story is expected to either frame its content by means of elaborate stylistic strategies, such as understatements, litotes, and epiphanies, or to present content that is in some way meaningful on its own" (2008, 303). Overall, these complications underline how the everyday remains a difficult and illusive term, the nature of which proves even more precarious once confronted by the conventions of literature.

I believe we can resolve some of these issues if we consider the ordinary and the significant as complementary rather than antithetical concepts. This approach allows Carver's stories to be read as firmly situated in the everyday. The rituals discussed above unfold in coffee shops, the home, or the home of a neighbor, arguably mundane domains. Furthermore, the characters' tools for resistance and reproduction are unexceptional. These devices can be found in interpersonal relationships, the self, or meals and record players. I do not see these observations as proof to an essential everydayness of the characters, settings, or situations in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. Instead, I wish to underline how these stories invite a consideration of daily life as a valid and meaningful sphere. This grants an approach to everyday life as a valuable realm within which working-class subjects can act and express themselves in significant ways.

Chapter Two: Material and Meaning
Objects in "Neighbors", "What Is It?", and "What's in Alaska?"

Many critics underline the spartan aesthetics of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. However, Carver's literary portrayal of material landscapes is far from tidy. His early stories are often littered with stuff. Carver takes us into the cluttered homes of his characters, where we become privy to the miscellaneous contents of their fridges and cupboards, the ornaments and trinkets they hang up on walls or place on coffee tables, and no matter where we step, there is usually an ashtray within our reach. Carver's persistent inclusion of objects into stories that prioritize only the elements necessary suggests their heightened significance. Indeed, critics have already noted the potential meanings we can discern from his literary landscapes. Bruce Weber catalogs Carver's narratives as a realist portrayal of "America's shoddy enclaves of convenience products and conventionality" (1984, 3). For some scholars, this setting incites a refusal of ambiguous symbolism, claiming instead that the "spare emotional and material texture of Carver's stories…is a kind of objective correlative of the dreary working-class lives his characters lead" (Mullen 1998, 99). Although these arguments are warranted, they potentially assume the surroundings of Carver's subjects do nothing but reflect the emptiness and despair of a modern proletariat.

In my view, the various things furnishing Carver's early stories, be it in the presence of a clock, a folded newspaper, or a shoe, much like his characters, serve a complex role in his narratives. In order to grasp this complexity, I aim to move away from stringent interpretations of objects in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. As I see it, the literary presentation of materiality in Carver's first collection invites epistemological flexibility across vast theoretical planes, from realism, figurative symbolism, and Marxist critique. Instead of applying these fields as restrictive templates for interpretation, they can serve as a collaborative backdrop to an open discussion. In my view, a multifaceted interpretation of materiality in Carver is essential, as it can address the complexity of his characters' ways of life. Recognizing the symbolic potential of their surroundings is paramount in order to acknowledge Carver's narratives as more substantial than a one-dimensional portrait of contemporary working-class existence. Furthermore, I find it crucial that we recognize the interactive relation between subjects and objects in the figurative possibilities we encounter. This approach is key if we are to avoid a reduction or simplification of Carver's blue-collar characters.

As mentioned above, some critics approach Carver's material landscapes as a one-dimensional backdrop to the character's working-class existence. We can relate this spartan reading to the controversial role of Carver's editor, Gordon Lish. In a 2016 article, suitably named "Will You Please be Edited, Please?" Wells Addington compares a selection of early Carver texts, before and after Lish's revisions. As Wells underlines, Lish had an "uncommon editorial influence over the stories that bore Raymond Carver's name" as he rigorously edited and excised his works, and often added his own words to revisions (2016, 1). Critics disagree on the significance of Lish's editorial role. Some argue it secured both the quality and success of Carver's writing, while others approach it as less significant to the realization of his oeuvre. Addington argues their relationship was one of mutual benefit, where "Carver wanted success and was willing to subsume his authority – and indeed his authorship – to Lish" while "[i]n Carver, Lish had a writer whose stories he could shape and a friend who was willing to defer to his judgments" (2016, 12). The effect of Lish on Carver's work is a complicated matter, and not something I aim to resolve in this thesis. What I wish to utilize from the debate on editor and author, is the fact that these writers held differing views to the effect and purpose of the written word. In my view, the conglomeration of their approaches lends tension to Carver's first collection and affirms the complexity of the narratives. With this observation as a vantage point, we are invited to approach the significance of objects with a diversified rather than one-sided approach.

Indeed, Carver and Lish harbored different literary aspirations. Lish had stakes in the minimalist project, and Carver gravitated toward realism (Addington 2016, 4). To support this claim, Addington compares the original and revised version of "Fat", an early short story published in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. The initial typescript presents a detailed description of the central character and his surroundings (Addington 2016, 13). In the revised version, Lish's editing "works to cut the story down by paring any detail or event that could be thought excessive" (Addington 2016, 14). Addington argues that "[t]he story remains essentially the same, however, with Carver's writing made, arguably, more focused by Lish" (ibid.). Addington's comparison captures the mechanics of Carver's first collection. The original text demonstrates how the provision of detail remains a central aspect of Carver's storytelling. Naturally, this is key to his literary portrayal of the modern American working class, as his attention to material detail fastens his characters to this specific cultural context. By extension, the minimalist style secured by Lish restricts the amount of context provided, and lend the remaining lines with a sense of heightened significance. As I see it, the tension

between surface descriptions and the possible symbolisms resting beneath them infuse Carver's early blue-collar narratives with richness and nuance.

There is a striking paradox in the critical treatment of Carver when it comes to this provision or omission of context. At one extreme, Mullen notes, critics confuse "minimalist *style* for absent *content;* lean, formal innovation for social disengagement" and "textual scarcity for mindless pleasure" (1998, 100). On the other hand, "social realist critics downplay the impressive formal innovation of Carver's work to recover a literary tradition that they sense is threatened by the often myopic and apolitical nature of formalist criticism" (ibid.). In my view, the insistence on placing Carver's work within a specific genre tends to result in template-like readings of his texts. Formalist discourse neglects the importance of the working-class setting of Carver's subjects, focusing solely on the technical aspects of the stories' execution. On the contrary, a realist reading discerns but a shallow photo-rendering of modernity, thus ignoring the symbolic weight the narratives lend to material objects. Moreover, such approaches to Carver's early stories often lead to the same conclusion, that the everyday lives of his characters are blank, mundane, and meaningless.

In my view, the objects of Carver's first collection offer a plethora of figurative meanings, taking on a protean rather than a one-dimensional function. In order to grasp the complex role of material items in his early work, we can expand our perspective on what Carver's literary landscapes communicate. Carver himself underlined the vast symbolic potential of objects in his storytelling:

> It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power (2009c, 730).

In line with Carver's sentiments, critics have noted his use of objects a figurative literary device. Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory argue that when reading his stories, "your initial impression of verisimilitude gives way to an unsettling recognition that things are not simply as they appear. Or rather, that things are more than what they appear" (1985, 62). McCaffery and Gregory's detection of deeper meaning underpinning Carver's material surfaces resonate with Wells Addington's claim to a "sense of mystery" in his early narratives (2016, 15). Daniel W. Lehman also champions the importance of things in Carver's stories, arguing that his "rhetorical rein over objects and events – as well as over the destinies of his characters – has always been significant" (2006, 1). Finally, Martin Scofield suggests that items provide a

gateway to understanding Carver's rhetoric, where an "object serves as a kind of focus" to the broader themes of his narratives (1994, 252). Indeed, there is much to suggest that there is symbolic weight to the material elements of Carver's early stories. However, many readings remain attuned to an idea of objects as literary devices under the author's jurisdiction. This potentially leads to interpretative strategies that reduce Carver's characters to static subjects that passively experience the meaning of their material surroundings as imposed on them.

Marxist discourse offers an alternative means to address material and meaning in early Carver. Still, this theoretical approach is also marked by restrictive interpretive strategies. Here, the linkage of everyday objects, be it household appliances, clothes, or furniture, to more abstract ideas like wealth, happiness, or success, is often seen as interconnected with capitalist ideology:

> Commodity fetishism refers to the distorted relationship existing between individuals and the production and consumption of goods. In fetishizing commodities, Marx argues that we treat the goods we buy as if they have "magical powers". We lose sight of the fact that *we* create commodities and in doing so, grant them a power over us that in reality they do not hold. (Appelrouth and Edles 2016b, 71)

The theory of commodity fetishism suggests that, in modern society, ideology grants objects a power over individuals, personal bonds, and relationships. Although there is truth to this perspective, it can also stand in danger of pigeonholing the working-class. For Carver's characters, this one-sided approach denies them the possibility of agency. It is true that his characters, at times, fetishize their material surroundings, and this remains a recurring theme in his working class-narratives. Still, the objects furnishing the everyday of his subjects can take on meanings beyond the predicaments of their blue-collar existence. Indeed, in early Carver, a bedspread can still serve as a powerful signifier of freedom, or a vibrant flower as an emblem passion. My point is that, although the narratives often warrant Marxist critique, Carver's stories are not exclusively bound to the symbolic associations of modern consumer culture.

If we are to partake in a productive discussion of objects in Carver and their effect on his literary working-class representation, I find it necessary to avoid the more overbearing traditions within Marxist discourse. Perhaps most notably, the principles of Louis Althusser's "*symptomatic*" reading (1970, 28). Althusser claims that specific competence is necessary in order to understand the underlying message of a given text:

> to see this invisible, to see these "oversights", to identify the lacunae in the fullness of this discourse, the blanks in the crowded text, we need something quite different from an acute or attentive gaze; we need an informed gaze" (1970, 27).

Althusser's approach is problematic because, in its essence, it mandates only certain people, possessive of the "correct" knowledge, can truly understand the world (Davis 2010, 3). Jacques Rancière takes issue with Althusser's argument, as the latter's demand for an educated gaze effectively excludes the working-class from the possibility of interpreting their own surroundings (Davis 2010, 7). In his view, "Althusserianism serves only to emphasize the gap of inequality between the instructed and those unschooled in Marxist science" (Davis 2010, 7-8). Rancière's argument remains highly relevant for interpretive approaches to objects in Carver's stories. Because Marxist discourse often connects the relation between materials and subjects to the predicaments of capitalist ideology, one can quickly assume that the working-class characters only relate to their surroundings as unknowing subjects supporting a corrupt system.

In Caver, such an approach to the bond between characters and the objects at their disposal reinforces the problematic assumption pointed out by Carolyn Steedman, namely that the working class professes the "the elemental simplicity of class-consciousness and little more" (1987, 13). If we are to take Carver's literary proletariat seriously, I see it necessary to problematize Althusser's attitude. Of course, considering the meaning of a literary work makes it difficult to avoid the mechanics of a symptomatic reading altogether. Engaging in the role of a critic typically involves a claim to understand the surroundings, experiences, and feelings of the characters at hand, perhaps better than they can themselves. Still, it is unproductive to read Carver's literary working-class as blind to the implications of their surroundings. His subjects orient the complex reality of modern everyday life, where capitalist ideology permeates the society they have to adhere to in order to live. This does not mean they are incapable of understanding the implications of their actions.

In my view, we can take on a more complex interpretation of the material surroundings in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* in order to avoid a reduction of Carver's blue-collar subjects. I suggest we interpret the significance of objects in interaction with and use by the characters. This allows us to recognize how symbolism arises in a dynamic relationship between characters and things. In my view, this approach is better suited to avoid a reduction of the characters as static recipients. As we have seen, this is a recurring issue in the interpretive approaches to objects in Carver, be it realism, minimalism, or Marxist critique. By approaching symbolism through the characters' interaction, we can read their

material surroundings in a way that recognizes their complex and at times problematic connotations, without deeming the subjects as static legatees of meanings they do not understand.

Accordingly, this chapter aims to explore the significance of objects in "Neighbors", "What Is It?", and "What's in Alaska?". In my view, this significance is best grasped through an open approach to the meanings inherent in Carver's material surroundings. His use of things in writing connects to the generic traits of realism, and effectively establish verisimilitude to his narratives. However, Carver's objects, often in tangent with the minimalist and experimental language through which they are presented, transcend this surface function and invite symbolic interpretation. The figurative potential of things in early Carver undeniably connects to the challenges of commodity fetishism, consumer culture, and capitalist power dynamics. However, the function of the objects presented cannot be reduced to the symbolic connections of Marxist critique alone. Ultimately, the multifaceted function of everyday objects in early Carver becomes a key aspect in the construction of his nuanced working-class representations. I draw on Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968). Baudrillard invites detailed attention to the shape, form, and texture of objects. Furthermore, he sheds light on the creative ways subjects can use and manipulate items in the everyday. Still, Baudrillard associates the symbolism of objects solely with capitalist ideology. I want to expand this reading. Overall, I find it necessary to move away from template-like or generic interpretations of objects in the narratives at hand, in order to adequately address their complex function.

Firstly, I briefly revisit "Neighbors" to introduce the complex role of objects in Carver's early narratives. Initially, Bill's careful attention to the contents of the Stone apartment realistically portrays the nature and rhythm of everyday working-class lives. By extension, the items presented add symbolic meanings to the narrative. For Bill, a detailed perception of his material surroundings becomes central for his experience of detachment and a consequent sense of freedom. Although the figurative effect of objects in the story mainly results in a positive experience for Bill, their metaphorical connotations also invite problematization. Most notably, the sunburst clock situated on the wall of the Stone apartment serves as a symbol of commodity fetishism and leads us to question whether objects and their attachment to capitalist ideology hold power over the characters. Still, in order to avoid a reduction of Carver's literary working-class to mindless consumers supporting a harmful system, we can consider how the characters actively use commodities.

In “What Is It?”, Toni and Leo, a married couple, face bankruptcy after a period of seemingly mindless spending. To salvage the family economy, Toni heads out to sell their convertible, and it is implied she must also “sell herself” in order to ensure the transaction. Carver’s realist style is also evident in this story and becomes particularly pronounced in the associations evoked by the family’s spending habits. Similarly to the sunburst clock, objects in this story also take on metaphorical weight. In part, they communicate a destructive conflation of material and interpersonal values. Beyond this critique of consumption, the narrative comes to reflect farther-reaching themes. For Leo, objects serve as mnemonic devices and provide nuanced insight into his persona. Furthermore, the narrative can be seen to reduce Toni’s role to a mere object in transaction, and the process of objectification she endures ought to be addressed. Still, as we scrutinize her role further, we find that she conducts a deeply meditated and symbolic self-sacrifice. Ultimately, we find that this story concerned with the consumer-based motif of a working-class family at the brink of economic ruin moves into broader themes.

Finally, “What’s in Alaska?” appears further removed from a critique of consumer culture, compared to the other narratives. This story also presents a failing marriage between Carl and Mary. Carl buys a pair of new shoes, before the couple visit their friends, Jack and Helen, for a night of food and drugs. Tension is soon revealed, with Carl suspecting an affair between his wife and Jack, and an impending move to Alaska hanging over them. Carl’s shoes contribute to establishing a working-class setting, but also offer insight into his character. In the narrative, we find that the meaning of objects relates to the characters in an interactive fashion. Impacted by Carl’s suspicions of the affair between Mary and Jack, everyday items communicate the implications of infidelity. Furthermore, the characters actively use objects as discourse-tools, incorporating them into modes of communication and interaction. The result is an intertwining of personal bonding and material objects. Although some of the characters seem to draw enjoyment from the disintegration that ensues, Carl experiences the lack of organization, be it of things, discussions, or the fabric of his everyday, as a threat.

The System of Objects: Colors, Materials, Creative Use, and a Critique of Consumption

Baudrillard invites a consideration of objects that recognizes the importance of their details. Discussing the significance of colors, he argues that their “traditional” use is associated with fixed meanings, either to social settings and roles or to materials such as wood, leather, and canvas (Baudrillard 2002, 30-31). In bourgeois homes, more subdued colors like grey or

beige, paired with heavy materials of velour, wool, and satin, reflect moral restriction (Baudrillard 2002, 31). The meaning of color changes in modern interior, where the wide variety of tints applied to walls, furniture, and utensils suggest, to Baudrillard, "a liberation stemming from the overthrow of a global order" (2002, 32). In addition to underlining the meanings of interiors in time, Baudrillard also elaborates on the effect of the various materials that make up specific objects. One example is wood, which "draws its substance from the earth, it lives and breathes and 'labours'" as "a material that has *being*" (Baudrillard 2002, 37). On the contrary, "plastic or artificial lightweight material, operates likewise as a kind of 'whiteness' – as a non-stressed indicator of the presence of these objects that bespeaks the radical omission from our consciousness the responsibilities they imply" (Baudrillard 2002, 33). In my view, Baudrillard's readings are too fixed and restrictive. However, he invites a tentative perspective on the small details that make up an object, be it color, texture, shape, or size. In relation to Carver, this approach is useful because it prevents a uniform conflation of all objects as commodities. In recognizing the specificity of objects, we can address the richness of Carver's literary portrayal of material surroundings.

To Baudrillard, the placement of objects in the home also creates meaning. He suggests that the "arrangement of furniture offers a faithful image of the familial and social structures of a period" (2002, 15). For example, the "typical bourgeois interior is patriarchal" (Baudrillard 2002, 15). He sees the logic of patriarchy reflected in the manner "[e]ach room has a strictly defined role corresponding to one or another of the various functions of the family unit, and each ultimately refers to a view which conceives the individual as a balanced assemblage of distinct faculties" (ibid.). Ultimately, these arrangements symbolize a rigid, traditional family unit, and the specific roles attached to this social construct (ibid.). This restraint is abandoned in the arrangement of modern living spaces (Baudrillard 2002, 17). As Baudrillard sees it, "[t]here is progress…between the individual and these objects, which are now more supple in their uses and have ceased to symbolize moral constraint, there is a much more liberal relationship, and in particular, the individual is no longer strictly defined through them relative to his family" (Baudrillard 2002, 17). Accordingly, Baudrillard portrays a progression in interior design, which has moved from a logic marked by strict definitions, boundaries, and arrangements into a flexible system that allows more leeway and freedom for the individual.

As a result, modern subjects actively use everyday objects in activities of "practical organization" (Baudrillard 2002, 21). According to Baudrillard, there now exists an "extremely free interplay of functions" within the items at the subject's disposal. As

Baudrillard notes, “[w]hat such objects embody is no longer the secret of a unique relationship but, rather, differences and moves in a game” (ibid.). As subjects move around furniture to fit their wants and needs, using chairs as tables or beds as sofas, the relationship between actors and objects is “founded on disposition and play” (ibid.). Ultimately, this becomes a marker of agency, where individuals liberate objects from a rigid system of categorical arrangements and employ them as a means for flexible and pliant self-expression (Baudrillard 2002, 25). Baudrillard argues that the modern subject “discovers himself in the manipulation and tactical equilibration of a system” (Baudrillard 2002, 27). Here, Baudrillard’s discussion offers insight into the ways subjects actively use objects in the everyday. Items are not always static signifiers of meaning, but rather tools at the disposal of the individual. In Carver’s texts, we see characters actively interacting with and using their material surroundings in the unfolding of the narratives.

One should note that Baudrillard ultimately deems the symbolism of objects as problematic. However, his critique is based on a view of knowledge and interpretation as accessible only to the elite. Remembering the predicaments of Althusser’s symptomatic reading, to which Baudrillard appears to subscribe, this type of approach reduces the working-class to mindless subjects sustaining a harmful system they cannot understand. Baudrillard argues, “the consumer society (objects, products, advertising) offers the individual the possibility for the first time in history, of total liberation and self-realization” (2002, 184). However, this experience of liberation and self-realization through objects ultimately promotes consumption, and thus sustains the capitalist system. As Baudrillard argues, the modern subject’s perception of being “[f]ree to be oneself” really means free to project one’s desires onto commodities" (Baudrillard 2002, 185). As the individual’s desires are directed onto their material possessions, they are effectively distracted from the problematic system that has enabled this relation. Baudrillard states that to the organs of power, “[w]hat is dangerous is freedom of being, for it pits the individual against society. Freedom of ownership, however, is harmless, for it unknowingly serves society’s purposes” (2002, 186). Although there is some merit to Baudrillard’s critique, it implies a patronizing view of the working class. He sees the proletariat as blind to ideology, where only “civilized people [sic!]” can glimpse the specialized meanings of objects (2002, 186). In my view, it is not so much Baudrillard’s critique of consumption that becomes problematic, but rather his assumption that the working class blindly support the capitalist system because they fail to see the ideological connotations of their material surroundings.

In conclusion, Baudrillard's arguments provide a vantage point as we turn to consider the significance of objects in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. Still, one should note that his efforts to organize the function of objects within a comprehensive system results in a somewhat limited consideration of their symbolic potential, and thus calls for expansion. What we can take with us from Baudrillard is first and foremost his careful attention to the specificity of objects, be it colors, textures, size, or arrangements. Furthermore, his arguments illuminate how individuals creatively use objects in the everyday and help us pay attention to the role of physical items as more than static signifiers. Baudrillard's arguments on the interaction between actors and things as "moves in a game" echoes the tactical nature of De Certeau's ways of operating (Baudrillard 2002, 21). Still, Baudrillard's critique of consumption fails to recognize any agency on the part of working-class subjects. In my view, his perspective is insufficient to address the complex role of objects in Carver's narratives. The stories included in this chapter invite to a consideration of working-class predicaments but never function as a straightforward critique of consumption alone. The symbolic weight of objects, as well as the ways in which they are interacted with, proves more complicated.

Objects in "Neighbors", Working Class Setting, Symbolism, and Critique

Let us briefly revisit "Neighbors", which I discussed in the previous chapter. Objects remain a focal point in Bill's ventures into the Stone apartment. Initially, the realism of Carver's writing is reflected in Bill's detailed attention to the contents of the living space, effectively capturing the everyday of a working-class family:

> He looked out the window, and then he
> moved slowly through each room considering everything that
> fell under his gaze, carefully, one object at a time. He saw ash-
> trays, items of furniture, kitchen utensils, the clock. He saw
> everything. (11)

Just as Baudrillard suggests we address objects with the same specificity as "flora or fauna, complete with tropical and glacial species, sudden mutations, and varieties threatened by extinction", so is Bill meticulous as he scans "one object at a time" in the Stone apartment (2002, 3). The list of things presented in this passage offers different pieces of information, which in turn symbolize the facets of everyday life in the Stone household. For instance, the plural tense of the ashtrays speaks to the frequency of Jim and Harriet's smoking habits. Bill refers to the home interior as "items of furniture", pointing to their generic design, and likely

affordable price. Finally, the clock and kitchen utensils point to the Stones' daily routine, centered around the preparation of meals and the temporal division of the day. Although each object offers individual knowledge, they come together and form a cohesive whole. Together, the items presented effectively portray the fabric, mode, and rhythm of the Stones' everyday.

Furthermore, the objects under Bill's gaze are presented with a language that invites a figurative reading of what they potentially signify. In my view, the items listed become central to Bill's experience of personal detachment, essential to the ritual discussed in chapter one. Considering the comparable habitus of the Stone and Miller families, it is reasonable to assume that the items in the Stone apartment can be found in Bill's home as well. Nevertheless, he moves "slowly" through every room of the apartment, and takes his time "considering" all he encounters. Despite the familiar quality of the Stone apartment, Bill's lack of ownership of the objects it houses offer an impersonal context. The objects in the home construct a symbolic void that allows Bill to disassociate and effectively "reach toward an otherness" (Boxer and Phillips 1979, 75). For Bill, the Stone's ashtrays, furniture, and trinkets are no longer just things. Instead, they serve as elements that construct an impersonal mirroring, a negative reflection of his own home. Within this mirrored space, Bill is free to desert the restraints of personal attachment. As he steps into this imagined realm, he feels as if he can see "everything". The wording suggests that Bill gains a sense of agency and control that he otherwise misses.

Bill is not just a passive observer of the symbolism inherent in these objects. His sense of freedom appears directly linked to the manner in which he interacts with his material surroundings. Bill's active role connects to Baudrillard's conception of "man the interior designer" (2002, 27). As mentioned above, Baudrillard uses this term to capture the ways the individual "dominates, controls and orders" objects through the "manipulation and tactical equilibration of a system" (2002, 27). A similar dynamic is reflected in the narrative:

> He opened all the cup-
> boards and examined the canned goods, the cereals, the pack-
> aged foods, the cocktail and wine glasses, the china, the pots
> and pans. He opened the refrigerator. He sniffed some celery,
> took two bites of cheddar cheese, and chewed on an apple as
> he walked into the bedroom. The bed seemed enormous, with
> a fluffy white bedspread draped to the floor. He pulled out a
> nightstand drawer, found a half-empty package of cigaretes and
> stuffed them into his pocket. (10)

As seen in this example, Bill does appear to execute “moves in a game” (Baudrillard 2002, 21). His dynamic involvement is augmented by the frequency of active verbs in the passage, where Bill opens, walks, pulls, and steps around the Stone home. When Bill samples the groceries in the fridge, they come to symbolize the freedom he enjoys in the apartment. The usually set boundaries of the household become opaque as he helps himself to the rations of another. The notion of freedom is further augmented by Bill’s pilfering of the cigaretes, which, as implied by the half-empty package, have already been used by someone else. This sense of agency and opportunity reaches an apogee in the image created through the “enormous” bed complete with a “fluffy white bedspread draped to the floor". Under Bill’s influence, the piece of furniture, with its square shape and white bedspread, conjures the image of a blank canvas. In this mental projection, the implied artist is Bill, who is free to manipulate the objects at hand.

Despite Bill’s seemingly positive experience in interaction with the objects of the Stone household, the story also invites a Marxist critique of its contents. For instance, the complicated relationship between the working-class characters and the symbolism of objects is demonstrated in their treatment of the sunburst clock situated in the Stone apartment. Bill recalls how “Harriet had come home with the clock, how she had crossed the hall to show it to Arlene, cradling the brass case in her arms and talking to it through the tissue paper as if it were an infant” (9). The provenance of this object, paired with its ornamental appearance, suggests it as a signifier of mobility and prosperity, arguably capitalist ideals. Therefore, the careful treatment of the clock implies the powerful hold of commodities on the lives of both the Stone and Miller families. Indeed, the manner in which this inanimate object is handled like an infant implies the substitution of an object in the place of a human subject, a clear demonstration of commodity fetishism. Later on, the sunburst clock is mentioned again, simply as “the clock” (11). It is striking that this particular object, symbolic of the families’ culturally mandated desires, looms in the background during Bill’s visits to the apartment. Remembering Baudrillard’s critique of consumption, the aim of capitalist marketing is to make its ideology “crystalize upon objects, which themselves thus become capable of negating the explosive force of desire and materializing the ritual repressive function of the social order” (Baudrillard 2002, 186). Ultimately, the fancy clock, heeded and hung on display on the wall of a working-class home, serves as an emblem of the capitalist system.

Still, if we are to recognize the complex role of objects in the narrative, even this overt fetishization of a clock requires further problematization. The Stone and Miller families are not mindless working-class subjects unable to discern the serious, ideological consequences

of commodity fetishism. For example, Bill notes how the clock is swaddled "like" a baby. This metaphorical comparison suggests that the characters are aware of their actions as play-pretend. Their use of the clock as a signifier of desirable ideals, although these ideals remain connected to capitalist ideology, serves as a means to cope with the challenges of their everyday lives. As a result, this undisguised example of commodity fetishism is rendered complicated in the narrative. The clock holds a certain power over the characters but also serves as a tool at their disposal.

In my view, we can relate the complex bond between the characters and objects in "Neighbors" to the overall function of material surroundings in Carver's literary working-class representation. As noted above, the interiors of the Stone apartment become powerful signifiers under Bill's gaze. Similarly, we observe the clock take on meaning beyond its practical function once subject to the Stones' and Millers' admiration. In both cases, the figurative potential of objects arises in interaction with the characters. The Stones and Millers are not passive observers to a set symbolism imposed on them by their material surroundings. Instead, meaning appears to arise as they actively engage with the objects within their reach. This implies a dynamic relationship between actors, things, and the meanings things take on. Of course, we can problematize the figurative projections that arise from this two-way relationship. Bill's engagement with the objects of the Stone household becomes part of his ritual, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, results in the sense of detachment and freedom. In this case, material things serve as elements of a mental liberation process for a working-class character. On the contrary, the Stones' and Millers' treatment of the sunburst clock amounts to a more problematic promotion of capitalist ideals. What these examples share in common is that the characters remain active participants in the creation of meaning, instead of passively absorbing the implications of their material surroundings. The overall impression is that of a complicated bond between subjects, material, and meaning in modern everyday life.

"What Is It?"

In "What Is It?", Leo and his wife Toni find themselves facing bankruptcy. In a desperate attempt to save money, Toni is forced to sell her convertible. The narrative insinuates that she also sells her body to the male buyer in order to secure the transaction. Initially, the story can be read as a cautionary tale on the destructive aftermath of blind consumption. Due to a short period of prosperity, while Toni worked in sales and Leo at a fiber glass plant, the couple find

themselves with money at their disposal (Carver 2009e, 159). Initially, Carver's literary realism is reflected in Toni and Leo's motivations to spend, manifested as a kind of appetite:

> Food, that was one of the big items. They gorged on food. He figures thousands on luxury items alone. Toni would go to the grocery and put in everything she saw. "I had to do without when I was a kid," she says. "These kids are not going to do without," as if he'd been insisting they should. (160)

Carver himself addressed the compulsion to eat as a recurring phenomenon in his stories, which he saw as a matter of realism: "[p]oor people, disenfranchised people, they can never get enough to eat. They're always putting too much on their plates and then not able to eat it" (Alton 1988, 16). Indeed, the contents of Toni and Leo's plates far exceed necessity. Leo's description of the food they buy as "one of the big items" implies the consumption of goods as a marker of decorum. This notion is further augmented by his wording of groceries as "luxury items" paired with his reflection on the "thousands" these were worth. Furthermore, Leo uses the verb "gorged" rather than ate, or enjoyed, deeming the family's eating habits as excessive indulgence. On the other hand, Toni and Leo's appetite can also connect to a yearning for stability. Toni defends her spending because she "had to go without" growing up, and expresses her desire to provide for her children. Therefore, her urge to buy "everything" at the store is not necessarily greedy. Aware of her fleeting and unstable access to capital as a working-class subject, Toni appears to be stacking up or bracing for the potential of hard times to come. Her desire to generously provide for the family counters the notion of mindless gorging and demonstrates how the spending patterns described above carry nuanced connotations to the more realistic aspects of socio-economic circumstance.

Although Toni and Leo's spending receives some nuance through this realistic portrayal, the problematic aspects of their participation in consumer culture prove an issue. The couples' fixation on the material aspects of their possessions leads them to miss out on the profound experiences they could offer. In the face of ruin, Leo reflects on "big parties" and "fine travel" he partook in (160). Still, it is not the social experience of these events, but the objects constructing their material surroundings, which take center stage. Trips to Tahoe and Reno are associated with the convertible and the car radio (160). Toni and Leo join a book club because Toni notes how "[w]e never had books around as a kid" (160). This statement places weight on the physical absence of books, which were never "around", rather than restricted access to reading or knowledge. Similarly, the couple enrolls in "record clubs" not to enjoy the music, but to acquire "something to play on the new stereo" (160). As a

consequence of the rapidity of Toni and Leo's consumption, they never have time to enjoy the meaning of the objects they attain beyond their surface value. The family time afforded by the trips, the actual content of the books, or the notes and rhythms of the records is neglected in a constant flow of new commodities.

As we turn to consider the figurative function of objects in this narrative, it appears the logic of commodity fetishism seeps into aspects of the Toni and Leo's everyday, corrupting bonds that lie beyond material value. For example, Leo recalls the brief life of the family's "pedigreed Terrier named Ginger" (160). Although Ginger is not a thing, but a living, breathing animal, she is conflated with the commodities at Leo and Toni's disposal. She is run over and killed a few days after being purchased, and Leo appears to remember her only for her exchange value of two hundred dollars (160). Similarly, a note from the children is reduced to its comparability to a bill, as "the only letter all summer not demanding payment in full" (159). Much like Ginger serves as a disposable object, the presence of Leo's children is replaced with a piece of paper. To enhance this sentiment, Leo's biggest comfort in the now lies within the little of material value he has left. He clings to the fact that the family still has furniture, clothes, and bicycles for the kids (159). While objects still capture Leo's attention, little is said of the bonds that tie the family together. In this regard, the narrative offers a potential critique. Echoing Baudrillard's argument for the problematic bonds between objects and meaning, Toni and Leo were, for a short period, "free to project [their] desires onto commodities" (2002, 185). Having invested all of their "desires" into objects, only to lose these due to bankruptcy, the couple faces the effective disintegration both of the physical and ideological fabric of their everyday.

Objects as Mnemonic Devices

As seen in the discussion above, the perils of consumer culture appear invited in a symbolic interpretation of objects in this story. Still, I do not see the narrative as statically constructed to commission readings based on Marxist critique. In my view, we should also consider how the material surroundings of the characters lend themselves to broader themes. For Leo, objects serve not only as things to possess but also as tools for reflection, which in turn provide insight into his persona. He engages in a series of reflective episodes centered around objects. We can read Leo's interactions with material surroundings as a creative implementation of objects as mnemonic devices. In one example, we learn that his mindset is shaped early on by his father:

> He recalls when he was a kid his dad pointing
> at a fine house, a tall white house surrounded by apple trees and
> a high white rail fence. “That’s Finch,” his dad said admiringly.
> “He’s been in bankruptcy at least twice. Look at that house.”
> But bankruptcy is a company collapsing utterly, executives cut-
> ting their wrists and throwing themselves from windows,
> thousands of men on the street. (159)

In this passage, the materials presented evoke associations to a children’s story, with the elemental forces of good and evil on display. The white house suggests innocence, and the apple trees protected by the white rail fence conjure the image of a haven, similar to Eden. As a stark contrast, the concept of bankruptcy is portrayed as an abstract and disruptive force. The violent image of men cutting their wrists and jumping from windows contrasts with the safety and peace associated with the orchard. Bankruptcy is a force capable of defeating “thousands of men” and poses a direct threat to the utopian haven formed by house and garden. This retrospection encapsulates Leo’s identity. His attraction to objects as markers of confirmation and prosperity is here revealed as inherited from his father. To Leo’s father, it is Finch’s “fine house”, rather than his personal attributes, that is worthy of admiration. By extension, we understand that the idea of bankruptcy serves to Leo as an ultimate threat, a force capable of “collapsing utterly” the things he understands as right and good.

In a later episode, objects again become central in establishing symbolic weight, offering insight into Leo’s character. Spotting his neighbor on the lawn, he recalls a previous affair and the feelings of guilt and shame connected to it:

> Ernest Williams looks from across the street. In his Bermuda
> shorts, stomach hanging, he looks at Leo and Toni as he directs
> a spray onto his begonias. Once, last winter, during the holi-
> days, when Toni and the kids were visiting his mother’s, Leo
> brought a woman home. Nine o’clock the next morning, a
> cold foggy Saturday, Leo walked the woman to the car, sur-
> prised Ernest Williams on the sidewalk with a newspaper in his
> hand. Fog drifted, Ernest Williams stared, then slapped the
> paper against his leg, hard. (158)

In the now, the way Ernest Williams “directs a spray” onto his flowers becomes a disciplinary gesture. The begonias, which are likely red or bright pink, can connote the misdirected passion of Leo’s affair. It also appears that the physical placement of Williams in relation to Leo carries significance. As the street separates them, Leo recalls an earlier point in time where the spatial arrangement between him and Williams was the same. In Leo’s memory,

Williams again comes across as a disciplinary figure. He "slap[s]" the paper against his leg, as if correcting a dog. The recollection of this motion makes Leo "hunch" his shoulders as if he were himself struck with the newspaper. In these examples, the objects Leo's centers his associations around go beyond their surface value. The spray of water, brightly colored flowers, the spatial arrangement of characters, and newspaper come together to conjure the image and implications of Leo's extramarital activities.

One last object functioning as a mnemonic device, or perhaps even transgressing this function, is the convertible. Its presence remains imposing in the story, as an emblem of the brief period of prosperity experienced by the family. It takes on an almost mythical nature and separates itself from the objects discussed above concerning memory. Firstly, the car seems to escape temporality altogether. In the narrative's opening paragraph, this is demonstrated through the intertwining of the car and different forms of temporal deixis. The vehicle is a concern today, tonight, tomorrow, and on Monday (157). Aesthetically, the car is also impressive, with "red hood and fenders that shine", signifying both masculine and economic ideals through its refined appearance (159). As Leo prepares the vehicle to be sold, he removes the "jack and spare", "pencils", "matchbooks," and "Blue Chip stamps" from its inside (159). Leo must remove himself from the object of his deepest desire. The trinkets which signify the routines, activities, and habits of his everyday can no longer remain inside the vehicle. As Toni drives away with the car, Leo calls out: "[a]ncient history!" (159). It seems that through this statement, Leo is leaving the car to the mythical realm to which it seemingly belongs, where he can remember it, but no longer physically reach it. As seen through Leo's reflective episodes, things serve not only as commodities to him, but also as instruments through which he understands himself, others, and the world. This reaffirms my discussion of "Neighbors" above. The symbolism of objects is not something that impresses on the characters as static recipients. Instead, meaning arises through an interactive relationship between subjects and their material surroundings.

Objectification

Although this chapter is mainly concerned with material objects, the issue of objectification proves a central in "What Is It?", especially for Toni's character. Remembering Martha C. Nussbaum's definition, the objectifying act can be formulated as the "making into a thing, treating *as* a thing, something that is really not a thing" (1995, 257). Kirk Nesset points out a comparable dynamic between Toni and Leo, where both are guilty of "equating one another to objects and figures" (1991, 307). Indeed, this problematic mode of interaction is

established in the opening of the narrative, where Toni tells her husband, "your credit's lousy. You're nothing" (157). Therefore, the examples of objectification in the story are not strictly gendered. The modes of reification at hand relate to the opaque boundaries between material, figurative meaning, and personal relationships, which mark Toni and Leo's everyday. Still, having considered the objectifying mechanics of Carver's early work in relation to Doreen and Arlene in the previous chapter, I see it as crucial to address the objectification of Toni as a female character.

Indeed, where Toni resorts to objectification as a means to belittle her husband, it seems Leo primarily understands his wife as a thing. For example, his initial description of her fixates exclusively on Toni's body: "[h]e follows her through the house, a tall woman with a small high bust, broad hips and thighs" (158). Leo's portrayal, focusing on Toni's tall stature, her "high bust" and "broad" lower body conjures the image of a totem or a statue. Whereas Leo grants Toni's body a rather intricate description, her personal attributes are addressed only in a generic fashion. Leo mentions how "Toni is smart and has personality" (157). Towards the story's conclusion, the man purchasing the convertible executes a similar reduction of Toni. He describes her as "a fine lady, very refined" (163). In this context, the word "refined" is not used to address Toni's taste or personhood. Instead, this sentiment is directed at her appearance. The duplicate objectification executed by Leo and the male buyer purports the underlying misogyny of the narrative, where Toni's role bleeds into that of the material surroundings.

The problematic nature of Toni's objectification reaches its apogee in the manner Leo treats her towards the narrative conclusion. After Toni returns home from selling her car, and potentially herself, Leo strips off her clothes in a violating manner, checks her underwear for signs of intercourse, and places her naked body in their bed (163). As he lays next to her wife, her naked body is presented as a richly symbolic text at his disposal:

> He runs his fingers over her hip and feels the
> stretch marks there. They are like roads, and he traces them in
> her flesh. He runs his fingers back and forth, first one, then an-
> other. They run everywhere in her flesh, dozens, perhaps hun-
> dreds of them. He remembers waking up the morning after
> they bought the car, seeing it, there in the drive, in the sun,
> gleaming. (164)

In this passage, Toni's skin communicates a plethora of potential meanings. Critics often focus on the parallel between her and the car (Nesset 1991, 307). As Leo "runs his fingers

back and forth" on the "roads" the stretch marks create in Toni's flesh, associations to the convertible quickly come to mind. The mental image of the car at the passage conclusion furthers this association. To Leo, Toni's once desirable body has lost its value in transaction and, like the car gleaming in the sunlit drive, becomes a thing of the past. Still, there are yet other ways to read the skin on her hip. Stretch marks are fissures created from the pulling apart of the skin, and thus come to reflect the powerful tensions in the narrative. Strain has been placed on the couple's economy and marriage, not to mention Toni's body. The severity of these conflicts is highlighted as a permanent manifestation on her skin. Lastly, the "hundreds" of traces Leo feels on the hip suggests that there are other paths he could have chosen for himself. This opens up the passage to self-inspection on Leo's part. The reading of the skin stands as an opportunity to re-think or address the problematic aspects of previous behavior. Of course, any redemptive potential becomes dubious through the objectifying means it is reached. Leo's overt use of his wife's body, like the storybook house in his father's tale, or the begonias on William's lawn, showcase how material surroundings can communicate abstract meanings. The resulting function of materiality in the narrative is complex, portraying an everyday where the lines between commodities, bodies, and emotional bonds are blurred or even erased.

Sacrifice

Much like objects communicate meaning beyond their surface value to Leo, Toni's role in the narrative moves beyond her objectification. Although her actions are bound to patriarchal power relations, the exchange of her body with the car serves as a meditated sacrifice. Some critics miss this penance, reducing Toni's role to an object of a transaction overseen by Leo and deeming her "infidelity as an embodiment of his failures" (Nesset 1991, 305). This sentiment proves more complicated if we consider Toni's experience as a saleswoman:

> Fact is the car needs to be sold in a hurry, and Leo sends
> Toni out to do it. Toni is smart and has personality. She
> used to sell children's encyclopedias door to door. She signed
> him up, even though he didn't have kids. (157)

This passage demonstrates Toni's competence. She appears successful as a peddler of "children's encyclopedias", a niche product. At the face of economic ruin, Toni must direct her experience as a saleswoman to her own body. Carolyn Steedman writes that "[u]nder particular social circumstances, people may come to understand that although they do not

possess *anything*, they possess themselves, and may be able to exchange themselves for something else" (1987, 68). As Steedman's continues, there exists a "specificity of a woman's situation, and the understanding of herself as an object of exchange that may arise when she has some choice over reproduction" (1987, 69). In the narrative, Toni faces the loss of her material possessions and understands her corporality as the only remaining "object of exchange" at her disposal. Regarding the upcoming car transfer, Leo claims he "sends Toni out to do it". However, having considered Toni's abilities as a saleswoman, it appears her husband does not send her. Instead of functioning as an inanimate object in the upcoming transaction, Toni directs her ability to market objects at herself, to salvage her family.

By extension, the detailed attention Toni pays to her clothing invite a consideration of the garments as tools at her disposal:

> Toni dresses up. Its four o'clock in the afternoon. Leo worries the lots will close. But Toni takes her time dressing. She puts on a new white blouse, wide lacy cuffs, the new two-piece suit, new heels. She transfers the stuff from her straw purse into the new patent-leather handbag. She studies the lizard makeup pouch and puts that in too. (157)

As Steedman notes, clothes can offer an aesthetic tool to working-class women. She writes that "women are … without class because the cut and fall of a skirt and good leather shoes can take you across the river and to the other side" (1987, 15-16). Toni seems aware that the clothes she puts on serve as devices through which she can tell a story. The white blouse and wide lacy cuffs conjure the image of a clean slate. Her heels can be associated with femininity and sensuality, but also afford authority, adding height to her already tall stature. Furthermore, Toni's choice of clothing offers some protection. She "transfers" the contents of a straw purse into a patent-leather handbag. The "stuff" Toni removes is deeply intimate, trinkets she carries with her on the daily. As she moves the personal belongings from the straw container, made of a dry, dense, and easily breakable material, into a sturdy leather handbag, she is not just guarding her things, but also herself. Similarly, the "two piece suit" evokes the image of armor being outfitted, piece by piece. Overall, Toni's outfit is not just a stylish getup. It serves as a means for her to communicate a narrative. Much like objects become meaningful under Leo's recollections, Toni lends her clothing a symbolic weight through her conscious orchestration. This allows her to retain some agency and protection at the face of the transaction.

Toni sells her car to a male buyer. However, as mentioned, the narrative also implies she has sold her body in order to secure a successful transaction. Toni's twofold bargain stands as a last resort to salvage the economy of her family, and thus serves as a mediated sacrifice on her part. However, Leo mistakes her sacrifice for a betrayal. As she forcefully reacts to the trauma she has endured, he appears to associate her with the disruptive force of his father's story:

> she makes a noise and lunges, catches his shirt, tears it down the front. "Bankrupt!" she screams. She twists loose, grabs and tears his undershirt at the neck. "You son of a bitch," she says, clawing. (163)

As Toni screams "[b]ankrupt", she does not only confront Leo with his biggest fear. She seems, in his eyes, to become a physical manifestation of bankruptcy. This conflation is evident as she tears his shirt. The torn garment forms a metaphorical wound, similar to how a predator rips the skin of its prey. In tangent with this imagery, Leo's exposed undershirt is comparable to innards on display. Just as bankruptcy led men to cut their wrists in the story of Leo's father, so has Toni cut into her husband. Akin to the destructive nature of this force, the passage portrays Toni as wild, almost feral, as she screams, twists and claws. This association is brought to completion when Leo spots Toni's makeup pouch, left at their doorstep by the man who purchased both Toni and the convertible (163). The pouch is made of "lizard" skin and figuratively conflates her with a reptile or serpent (157). It appears Leo does not see his wife as a savior, but rather as a serpent corrupting Eden. Ultimately, Toni's sacrifice, mistaken by Leo as a betrayal, comes close to a tale of biblical proportions.

In my view, the complexity of Toni's sacrifice encapsulates the multifarious role of objects in "What Is It?". The destructive aspects of consumer culture are demonstrated in Toni's forced marketing of her body. The transaction of her physical form along with the car suggest the line between commodities, bodies, and relationships disintegrate and form an untidy reality. However, even this consumer-based dilemma invites reflection on vaster philosophical themes, such as or sacrifice and betrayal. Furthermore, these themes arise directly from the interpersonal conflict between husband and wife. This suggests that the symbolism of objects in the narrative relates to the actions of the characters. Overall, this dynamic relationship between objects, their underlying meanings, and the characters continue throughout the story. Leo uses the subjects of his material surroundings as mnemonic devices, which provide the reader with a fuller understanding of his persona. This effect applies to his

objectification of Toni as well, which despite its problematic connotations, reinforces his use of objects as tools to address figurative meanings. Similarly, Toni employs the things at her disposal in a manner that reflects her abilities beyond a commodity in transaction.

Conclusively, the role of objects furnishing "What Is It?" becomes a problematic aspect of the narrative, but also remains key in developing it beyond a one-sided critique of a literary working-class family. This conclusion suggests the things in Carver's early stories do not appear to serve a set purpose, be it in providing verisimilitude, grounds for Marxist critique, or conveying other symbolic meanings. Most importantly, the protein function of objects in early Carver arises in an interactive relationship with the characters. This underlines how the working-class subjects at hand are never passive recipients of the implications of their surroundings. Instead, meaning arises through action, underlining the dynamic quality of Carver's proletarian subjects.

"What's In Alaska?"

As we turn to "What's in Alaska?", objects play a central part in the construction of this narrative as well. However, in contrast to "What Is It?", the material surroundings of the characters are not distinctly connected to the challenges of consumer culture. The story introduces Carl and Mary, a married couple who visit their friends Jack and Helen for a night of marihuana smoking. Friction is soon revealed between the characters, as Carl suspects his wife is pursuing an affair with Jack. Similar to Leo's use of objects as mnemonic devices, the ways Carl relates to his material surroundings provide insight into his character. The opening paragraph is centered around him, purchasing a pair of new shoes, before returning home and preparing for the upcoming evening. Carl puts his foot on a stool and has a clerk, "unlace his work boot" (Carver 2009f, 60). As an exchange for the boots, he requests something comfortable and casual, choosing among three options a pair of "soft beige-colored shoes" that make his feet feel "free and springy" (60). Carl's change of shoes effectively signifies a transition from work to leisure. The rigid and sturdy material of the boots, associated with the frames and obligations of work, is replaced with a soft and flexible texture. Carl furthermore has the leisure to choose the new shoes based on personal preference, whereas we may presume the work boots to be part of a mandated uniform. Finally, the shoe change demonstrates a transfer in social roles, from worker to patron. After a day's labor, Carl leans back and has someone else remove his boots. Overall, the simple change of one shoe to another establishes a socio-economic framework to the narrative.

But Carl's new shoes do more than accent his class position. As Alexander Styhre writes, "this everyday activity and the shoes… serve the role of saying something essential about [Carl]" (2017, 179). Indeed, Carl's engages in active interaction with his new footwear, which seems to go beyond commodity fetishism. Instead of emblemizing capitalist ideology, the shoes intertwine closely with his person. Marked by their minimal design, they illustrate little in terms of decorum. Instead, Carl's new shoes evoke associations to the objectivity of a naked human body. Their soft, flexible material and "beige" color approximate them to bare skin. The quality of the shoes evokes Baudrillard's description of wood as a material that "draws its substance from the earth" and "lives and breathes and 'labours'" (2002, 37). To enhance the connection between the shoes and corporality, they become directly associated with Carl's body as he returns home, strips off his clothes, and soaks in a bathtub (60). As with the shoes, Carl's flesh receives detailed attention. He scrubs out the lube grease under his nails, and Mary, situated on the edge of the tub, plays with the "wet hair on his thigh" (60-61). The nearly seamless transition in focus from Carl's footwear to his naked body suggests that the new shoes serve as an extension of his very person. This again augments an interactive relationship between subjects and objects in Carver's early narratives. Carl is not a passive recipient of the meaning of these shoes. Instead he is interconnected with them in a kind of symbiosis.

The notion of meaning for objects arising through interaction is further underlined when Mary rejects Carl's shoes. This can be read as a sign of the burgeoning marital tension between them. Styhre notes this as a distinctly Carverian literary device, where one finds "seemingly passive but significant objects shaping and structuring the relationships between individuals" (2017, 182). Mary signals her skepticism about the shoes early on: "I don't like the color, but I'll bet they're comfortable" (60). Later she weaponizes Carl's fondness of the shoes, snapping "[i]f the shoe fits" as a comeback to his bad mood (64). As the shoes are intertwined with Carl's person, Mary's judgments insinuate more than personal taste. Ultimately, Mary disregards not only the shoes but Carl himself. In turn, Carl struggles to grasp what has prompted Mary's reaction. While visiting Helen and Jack, he stretches his legs and looks at the shoes "under the light" (63), and later on, examines the shoes closely under a lamp (67). In those moments, he appears not just to reconsider his purchase. He is also aiming to understand Mary's rejection. Failing to arrive at an answer, Carl hides the shoes under the coffee table. He resigns from interpreting Mary's feelings for him and moves the signifying object of this rejection out of sight. Overall, the shoes become an emblem of Carl and Mary's marital problems.

Having considered Carl's relation to his shoes, I would argue that the material surroundings of the main character in this narrative take on similar mechanics to those in "Neighbors" and "What Is It?". Bill implements the objects in the Stone home as part of his liberating ritual. Leo utilizes the items of his material surroundings as mnemonic devices, an activity which in turn provides deeper insight into his character. Similarly, Carl's connection to his footwear carries meaning beyond the establishment of verisimilitude. The shoes intertwine with his character and become a signifier of his very person. As crystallized by Mary's weaponization of the shoes, and the marital tension this action comes to imply, the symbolism of everyday objects in this narrative arises through the character's interaction with their surroundings. The subjects of the story are not passive observers of symbolic implications. Instead, figurative projections have their genesis in Carver's active characters, whose relation to the world around them adds depth and complexity to these stories.

Objects in Communication

Indeed, we can trace the symbolism of objects arising in interaction with the characters throughout "What's in Alaska?". Arthur Bethea argues that many of the "ordinary details" of the story serve as "sexual symbols" alluding to the suspected affair between Jack and Mary (2002, 43). Although I agree that this symbolic projection accounts for many of the objects included in the narrative, they are not necessarily independent literary devices. I argue that the symbolic connection between material items and infidelity arises interactively through Carl's suspicion. Under his mistrustful gaze, ordinary items come to reflect his wives' extramarital activities. For instance, the water pipe the friends use to get high is referred to as a "hookah", alluding to the "hook- up" Carl suspects between Mary and Jack (62). At the market with his wife, Carl adds a "handful of U-No bars to the order" (61). Here, the brand name doubles as an innuendo: "you know" what is going on. Later on, the chocolate bars resurface as a sign of Mary's potential affair. Jack states that "U-No bars are good", upon which she replies, "[t]hey melt in your mouth" (65). As Bethea notes, "the implications of fellatio are not hard to see given the bars phallic shape, its provocative name, and the image of a creamy substance in her mouth" (2002, 46). The possibility of infidelity is again insinuated through an object when Mary exits the kitchen with an "orange Popsicle" in her mouth (66). Because Carl has observed her "move against Jack from behind and put her arms around his waist", Mary's "suck[ing]" the popsicle appears suggestive (66). As seen here, Carl's suspicions lead his material surroundings to communicate the implications of his concerns.

Another pertinent example of symbolism arising through interaction between subjects and objects can be found in the way Carl, Mary, Jack, and Helen use objects as discourse tools. This evokes Baudrillard's discussion of subjects employing objects in a "manipulation and tactical equilibration of a system" (Baudrillard 2002, 27). Similar to how Baudrillard argues individuals detach objects from rigid systems to engage with them more freely, the characters utilize material items in modes of communication. For instance, when Mary and Carl arrive at Helen and Jack's house, the immediate topic of conversation does not concern recent experiences, encounters, or thoughts, but the corn chips they have brought (61). Jack uses much of his time offering cream soda to his guests, and later on, when they are out of it, a glass of milk (69). The question of "[w]hat's in Alaska?" is also posed (65). This refers both to the title of the story and a potential move for Carl and Mary as a response to a potential job offer. Objects soon infiltrate this topic as well. Carl ironically suggests that once relocated up north, he might grow some of the "giant cabbages you read about". In response, Helen playfully proposes starting up a pumpkin distribution business (65).

At a surface level, it seems as if objects take up too much space here, and limit the possibility for any profound discussion between the friends. However, the manner in which the characters use objects is playful and inventive. As Helen chooses to focus on the corn chips, the conversation steers away from the tedious drone of work, child-rearing, and daily tasks, which have likely marked the time since the friends last spoke. Furthermore, Jack's offering the cream soda can be seen as an effort to appease the tension between him and Carl, with the concluding glass of milk functioning as a white flag. Lastly, the talk of giant cabbages and pumpkins evoke a childlike fantasy and serve as distractions from the uncertainty connected to the move and potential work awaiting in Alaska. The creative ways the characters implement objects in their discussion here speaks to De Certeau's ways of operating. Through the use of items in discourse, they maneuver themselves from the more tedious aspects of their lives, and anchor themselves in the moment, aimed at leisure and relaxation. As seen through the character's creative use of materials in communication, the objects at hand can serve as tools through which they create their figurative meanings.

The effect of this dynamic game of wordplay reaches a chaotic apogee as the group of friends smoke marihuana. In the ensuing scene, the characters' increasingly anarchic implementation of objects in communication coincides with Baudrillard's portrayal of societal progression through interior design. Moving from the rigid frames and hierarchies of bourgeois decor, modernity is marked by highly flexible arrangements (Baudrillard 2002, 17). In the narrative, we can trace a similar relaxation of clear boundaries expressed through

material arrangements. As the group of friends gets high, objects and language alike flow across the page, resulting in extreme fragmentation. The characters appear to bend and alter the boundaries that mark their everyday, and potentially experience a sense of freedom:

> "We should have got more," Helen said.
> "More what?" Mary said.
> "More money," Jack said.
> "No money," Carl said.
> "Did I see some U-No bars in that sack?" Helen said.
> "I bought some," Carl said. "I spotted them last minute."
> "U-No bars are good," Jack said.
> "They're creamy," Mary said. "They melt in your mouth."
> "We have some M and M's and Popsicles if anybody wants any," Jack said.
> Mary said, "I'll have a Popsicle. Are you going to the kitchen?"
> "Yeah, and I'm going to get the cream soda, too," Jack said. "I just remembered. You guys want a glass?"
> "just bring it all in and we'll decide," Helen said. "The M and M's too." (65)

This verbal exchange between the friends breaks with traditional discourse patters. The characters respond to each other at random, with no distinct topic or situation in time. Where Helen queries the amount of marihuana at their disposal, Jack responds with concern about money. The U-No bars unhinge the conversation from the present, relating to Carl and Mary's previous visit to the market. Furthermore, the popsicles, cream soda, and M and M's add to the disorganization reflected in the multitude of unrelated objects presented. The formal organization of the text augments the impression of fluidity. Just as the living room appears as a messy space filled with smoke, people, and sweets, so do the fragmented words and sentences appear as objects scattered randomly across the page. Overall, the conversation is marked by the blending together of various elements, with no discernable unifying thread. Mary addresses the manner of their verbal exchange, stating, "[y]ou start with the desserts first and then you move on to the main course" (66). This comment suggests that the experience is amusing or pleasurable. Indeed, the conversation stands as a radical break with everyday conventions for communication, which potentially leads to a sense of liberation for the characters.

Although there are positive effects associated with the use of objects in conversation, the somewhat chaotic nature it creates invites problematization. For Carl, the disorganized experience of the gathering seems to project not flexibility and freedom, but rather disintegration. Again, we can turn to Baudrillard, who argues the "style of furniture changes

as the individual's relationships to family and society change" where between subjects and objects "there is a much more liberal relationship, and in particular, the individual is no longer strictly defined through them relative to his family" (Baudrillard 2002, 17). Akin to Baudrillard's association between the fluid role of items in modernity with the dissolution of rigid family structures, Carl experiences the unpredictable use of objects in the narrative as a threat to the set arrangement of his selfhood, marriage, and everyday:

> Carl held his glass out and Jack poured it full. Carl set the glass on the coffee table, but the coffee table smacked it off and the soda poured onto his shoe.
>
> "Goddamn it," Carl said. "How do you like that? I spilled it on my shoe."
>
> "Helen, do we have a towel? Get Carl a towel," Jack said.
>
> "Those were new shoes," Mary said. "He just got them."
>
> "They look comfortable," Helen said a long time later and handed Carl a towel.
>
> "That's what I told him," Mary said.
>
> Carl took the shoe off and rubbed the leather with the towel.
>
> "It's done for," he said. "That cream soda will never come out." (66-67)

In this passage, it is almost as if the coffee table comes alive to attack Carl. Although he firmly places his glass on the table, the table itself "smack[s]" it onto his shoe. Bethea connects this soda spill Carl's belief "that his marriage has been severely damaged" (2002, 47). Cream soda is also Jack's drink of choice. Just as Carl suspects Jack has invaded his relationship with Mary, so has Jack's soda seeped into Carl's shoe. As a result, the sense of his marriage being spoiled by an invader reaches a physical manifestation, literally presented at Carl's feet. As Carl concludes that his shoes are "done for", I would agree with Bethea that he reflects the same sentiment onto his marriage. Bethea concludes, through overt imagery, that the spilling of the soda becomes a direct reflection or recreation of extramarital intercourse, with Jack's seed "spilling" into Mary (2002, 47). In my view, the shoes are closely intertwined with Carl, and thus the spillage is not metaphorically directed at Mary, but instead serves as an attack on his sense of self. As the synthetic drink permanently mars the natural leather of the footwear, the very object that captures Carl's essence becomes corrupted. Overall, the objects in the passage come to reflect Carl's experience of dissolution concerning his sense of self, his marriage, and by extension, the very fabric of his every day.

At the conclusion of the narrative, Carl's fear at the face of uncertainty remains a central focal point. As David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips suggest, Carl's fears appear to confront him through a physical manifestation (1979, 85):

> Just as he started to turn off the lamp, he thought he saw something in the hall. He kept staring and thought he saw it again, a pair of small eyes. His heart turned. He blinked and kept staring. He leaned over to look for something to throw. He picked up one of his shoes. He sat straight and held the shoe with both hands. (71)

The exact nature of the "something in the hall" is dubious. It may be the embodiment of the "that" implied in the question serving as the title of the story, thus connecting to the uncertainty surrounding Carl and Mary's upcoming move to Alaska. The "pair of small eyes" alludes to something wild or predatory, coinciding with the nature associated with Alaska as a geographic location. By extension, the idea of being hunted coincides with the hopelessness Carl experiences at the face of Mary's potential infidelity. Ultimately, the ambiguous nature of this final thing confronting Carl encapsulates the chaotic dissolution he is experiencing. As he picks up his shoe, an object emblematic of himself and his preferences, he appears to cling on to the last fragment of familiarity in an everyday otherwise threatened by the unknown.

Although "What's in Alaska?" seems further removed from the span of Marxist critique compared to the stories discussed above, the ominous conclusion does invite a problematization of materiality. As Styhre writes, the "abundance of resources stands in the way for meaningful relations and activities" (Styhre 2017, 185). The symbolic weight of objects arising in the ways characters instrumentalizes them, take up considerable space in the story. One could argue that objects thus lead the characters astray, as they engage with their material surroundings to a point where the central issues of their lives, such as the possible affair or upcoming relocation, are never brought up fully in communication. On the other hand, the symbolic weight of objects is central to the construction of this narrative. Through the figurative projections born from the characters' actions, the story takes on depth and nuance. Overall, objects appear to serve a similar role in this story as in the narratives discussed above. At a surface level, they do construct a realistic backdrop to Carver's portrayal of modern blue-collar existence. More importantly, though, the subjects' dynamic relation to the objects structuring their surroundings results in a plethora of meaning, which underlines the complex, nuanced, and rich nature of the ways of life of the working-class characters. The figurative implications born form the relationship between subjects and

objects do, at times, prove problematic. The parameters of capitalist ideology permeate the societal system they inhabit, but this does not mean that they are passive subjects to the meaning of their material surroundings. Instead, the meaning of materials arises directly from the activities of these working-class characters. In my view, this speaks to their complex and active navigation within the intricate realm of modern everyday life.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the complex role of objects in three Carver narratives. Firstly, I want to note that Carver's tendency toward realism stands as an essential aspect of his literary working-representation. The attention paid to furniture, clothes, items of food, or trinkets effectively places his characters within a blue-collar setting. The presence of assorted ashtrays and refrigerated apples in the Stone apartment gives insight and texture to the everyday life of a proletarian family. Similarly, Leo and Toni's spending relate to the often unstable economic reality typical of their socio-economic position. Carl must still pull the "stem in the alarm", despite a drug-infused bender, because work awaits in the morning (70). These details carry importance at a surface level, as they situate the characters at hand within a specific setting. Carver's dedication to realism suggests that his literary subjects are not detached from reality, but rather that the nature, content, and unfolding of their everyday has considerable roots in verisimilitude,

Still, the objects of Carver's early writing exceed the role of surface-level signifiers. As we consider the symbolic weight of things in the narratives above, the typical concerns of Marxist critique often appear invited. In each story, the merging of material and vaster meaning carries serious, often destructive consequences. For the families in "Neighbors", the sunburst clock stands as a symbol and homage to capitalist ideals. In "What Is It?" Toni and Leo demonstrate the ruinous aspects of consumer culture. Finally, objects take up much space in "What's in Alaska?", perhaps to a degree where matters of significance get lost in the clutter. Indeed, the downsides of capitalist ideology are reflected throughout Carver's material landscapes. Because the working class presents a group often hurt by this economic system, the parameters of Marxist critique does remain vital in addressing the challenges of Carver's literary proletariat. Still, this theoretical approach stands within the danger of neglecting his characters' capacity and sense of agency. Although they sometimes engage with their material surrounding in problematic ways, this does not deem them as mindless subjects unknowingly purporting capitalist ideology. Carver's subjects inhabit a societal system to which they must

adhere to some degree. In my view, this says little of their ability to comprehend or understand the implications of their actions.

In my view, the reduction of Carver's characters often appear connected to and rigid, template-like readings of his early narratives. This applies to the expectations of realism, minimalism, and Marxism alike. Because the everyday of Carver's working subjects is complicated and nuanced, interpretations that lack flexibility often miss out on the gradations necessary to recognize the capacity of his characters. Instead of strictly following the principles of a given approach, I have navigated different interpretative strategies in order to address the complexity of objects in each narrative. This seems fitting, for *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* appears to result from a complex amalgamation. Carver and Lish came together from different backgrounds and harbored different literary aspirations. In my view, the ramifications of the collection's genesis are reflected in the nature of its stories. It presents working-class narratives with material landscapes, which, much like the characters inhabiting them, harbor a complexity beyond the negative aspects of proletarian existence.

Overall this chapter has aimed to underline the interactive and dynamic relationship between subjects and objects in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*?. In my view, recognizing how characters impact the symbolic projections of their material surroundings gives us a fuller understanding of objects and their significance for Carver's nuanced working-class representation. In my view, the symbolisms of objects in these stories are not set projections to which the characters remain passive recipients. I do agree that in Carver's early narratives, ordinary trinkets, be it in the presence of a clock, a flower, or a shoe, can harbor "immense, even startling power" (Carver 2009c, 730). However, I argue that the source of this startling power is not located within the author's intention, nor the objects themselves. It is Carver's working subjects that create meaning, as they navigate their material landscapes in complex ways.

Chapter Three: Working-Class Mythologies
Women's Use of Myth and Story-Telling in "Fat" and "Why, Honey?"

Several narratives in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* are presented as stories told by a character. Mr. Slater in "Collectors" muses over a visit from a door to door vacuum salesman. As he tells it, the ensuing sales pitch incites philosophical reflections on what is left behind by a life lived, like specks of dust buried in a carpet. In "Night School" a recently divorced man reflects on his encounter with two women. In his re-telling of this meeting, it appears to have helped him accept the difficult separation from his spouse. As I see it, these tales go beyond reiterations of past events. In an effort to manage everyday episodes, the characters transplant them into a mythical realm through storytelling. By mythical realm, I refer to an imagined space where a storyteller can retell the past according to their own view. When a narrator places its subjects within this domain, they can shape and stylize them with the aim of a specific effect. In Carver's early work, the mythical realm often serves as a means to idealize and thus grasp the significance of ordinary incidents. Once included in the myth of the storyteller, a late night conversation or a peculiar merchant can prove deeply meaningful. Moreover, the story-telling act provides a vital medium through which myths are communicated. The art of telling allows one both to convey myths to the self as a means for reflection, and to others in an effort to transmit its message into the public. This is not to say myth or storytelling in Carver exist apart from the everyday. Instead, we can consider these as everyday communicative practices the characters employ to make sense of their realities.

Carver's early work typically provides minimal insight into the concrete thoughts of his subjects. Instead of accepting this as a reflection of limited emotional capacity, we can look to other modes of expression which suggest the complex inner lives of his characters. I argue the use and communication of myths, a reflexive and conscious act, stands as a testament to their imagination. This makes mythmaking, and the storytelling employed to communicate tales, important not just for Carver's working-class representation, but for his female working-class representation in particular. As Bruce Marshall Gentry argues, Carver's fiction "regularly shortchanges women by making their minds seem less complex than men's minds" (1993, 88). Indeed, his female characters often serve as mere bodies, oppositions, or problems in the stories of male subjects. As a result, the rare instances where Carver's fictitious women get to define their own narratives offer a means to engage more seriously with their characters.

Before addressing the construction of myths, we should first define the term. Some associate myth with false narratives, often connected to stereotypes. Others will identify myth as a story concerned with epic characters and events. As Chris Baldick explains, these two approaches connect to a rough division in use of the word, which he categorizes as either "rationalist" or "romantic" (2015, 235). The rationalist definition presents myths as based on falsehoods, while the romantic definition frames them as narratives concerned with fundamental truths (ibid.). I move away from both interpretations, as they potentially suggest myths are hegemonic narratives individuals can draw from, but not personally create. Richard Chase takes issue with this approach, where "myth is a kind of ready-made construct which gives form and guidance to our understanding of life" (1969, v). This understanding of myth is potentially problematic, for as Walter Benjamin argues, the prevailing definition of history lies within the grasp of its victors (2017, 739). As history and myth alike can be defined as shapeable narratives, Benjamin's reflection on power dynamics remains applicable. If one assumes myths only spring from the realm of the collective, it is easy to lose sight of voices that do not benefit from power. In the public sphere, those who enjoy dominant positions can purport the narratives that interest them, and ignore those that do not. For instance, the "ready-made" myths upheld by a society might not address the concerns of working-class women adequately.

In order to confront this issue, we can approach myth as something individuals can construct from their own unique experiences. Many critics support an open interpretation of what a myth can be. Robert A. Segal suggests we define a myth "as simply a story about something significant" (2015, 4). Chase underlines how "myth is something dynamic and operative" (1969, v). Roland Barthes writes that "everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse" (2000, 109). These approaches to myth open the term almost completely, leaving it perhaps too ambiguous to be of much use. Still, this type of open argument provides a vantage-point for a definition of myth that recognizes the inclusion of personal rather than communal experience. When reading early Carver, I suggest we approach myths as a constructed space where events and characters are portrayed consciously by a storyteller. In Carver's oeuvre, the subjects and plots of a myth tend to originate in the characters' real life experience. However, once the storyteller casts their chosen material into a story, it can be stylized and shaped more consciously. Instead of simply reiterating the past, the storyteller places weight on the elements vital to the effect and purpose of their tale. Carverian myths are thus not necessarily untrue. In fact, they are typically firmly rooted in the

real. Overall, we can view them as an aestheticization of the real through an emphasis and focus provided by the mythmaker.

Once a myth is stylized from the specific point of reference of an individual, its characters and contents invite figurative interpretations. This suggests the importance of the story-telling act in itself. Firstly, it allows the storyteller to arrange and structure their personal myths in order to reflect on their implications. Furthermore, the act of narration can re-orient the content of these tales outward and into the public realm. As Langeiler and Peterson write, "[t]he telling of the story is a performance. As a human communication practice, performing narrative combines the performative 'doing' of storytelling with what is 'done' in the performance of a story" (2004, 2). In Carver's early work, these two modes of storytelling, introspection and communication, are usually applied to past events. Characters assume a role as storytellers in order to confront prior encounters or experiences. Overall, we can regard the story-telling act as possessing a twofold function. In tangent with the stylization executed through myth-making, it allows subjects to frame, articulate and contemplate over past events. In addition, it serves as way of transporting personal experiences from the inner and personal to the outer and collective.

Furthermore, I stress that neither myth nor storytelling necessarily connect to the grand or extraordinary. Whereas Benjamin writes "the art of storytelling is coming to an end" I would suggest that stories are still being told, and thus myths created, if we consider the complex concerns of everyday life as a valid subject matter (1999, 83). This becomes particularly important in relation to Carver's work. As mentioned above, the myths constructed in his early narratives, as well as the ways they are conveyed, is usually tightly connected to the ordinary. His working-class characters choose parts of seemingly mundane past events as the material for their myths, be it an encounter with a neighbor, a conversation with a stranger, or a trip to the supermarket. These tales are also communicated through humble means, sometimes with no defined audience outside the self. More often, however, storytelling in Carver arises in conversation with other characters, hunched over tables with a cup of coffee or a cigarette in hand. As I see it, we must direct our attention to the gravity of the everyday if we are to recognize myth and storytelling in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. In so doing, we can consider the experiences of Carver's literary working-class women as a valid subject for mythologies.

Ultimately, my open consideration of myth and storytelling connects to the core principles of ordinary language philosophy. Ludwig Wittgenstein, a pioneer for this philosophical approach, takes issue with attitudes to language which presuppose that it can

address some ultimate, decided truth. Instead, he directs our attention to the concept of use as significant in and of itself. As Toril Moi explains about Wittgenstein:

> we simply don't accept that "use" explains anything. Use seems so flimsy. We don't pay attention to use because we keep looking for something firmer, deeper, something that can *ground* use itself, something like the ultimate explanation of meaning as such. Wittgenstein's most fundamental conviction – and the hardest to follow – is that the request for such an ultimate explanation is meaningless because it presupposes a picture in which meaning, or use, has a ground. (Moi 2017, 35)

Wittgenstein moves away from a conception of language which assumes it holds some decided, hegemonic meaning. If we examine a sentence looking for an underlying, definite truth, we will not be able to find it. We can look to the various ways language is used, instead of placing the weight of significance on its meaning. In this sense, Wittgenstein offers an approach to language, and in turn, literature, which breaks with a scientific quest for answers that are calculated and generally applicable. He invites us to let go of "our cravings for generality" manifested in "trying to find something all relevant phenomena have in common" (Moi 2017, 36). We can utilize Wittgenstein's outlook as we consider the construction and communication of myths as well. Rather than treating myth as a hegemonic narrative with general traits, we can approach it as something plural, diverse, and shapeable through the story-telling act.

Wittgenstein's philosophy proves useful as we turn to seriously consider women's stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. Carver's first collection presents a fictional America that is notoriously complicated. There are no general or clear pathways laid out for the characters. They sometimes struggle without reward, and questions of morality are usually left ambiguous. For Carver's female subjects, the literary landscape they inhabit is perhaps even more intricate, as they navigate working-class predicaments, gender dynamics, and personal ambition. In my view, this complex reality suggests that the characters resort to other myths, stories that do not spring from collective or hegemonic narratives. In order to address the lore used by Carver's literary women, we must direct our attention to the everyday. Accordingly, this chapter aims to consider how the female characters in "Fat" and "Why, Honey?" use myths to confront their personal experiences. Both stories are centered around women's encounters with male characters and raise important questions about power dynamics in a working-class context. Moreover, their engagement with the story-telling act stands as an important testament to their ability to reflect and to claim personal agency. In a

body of work where female characters often do not enjoy the fullness of voice granted to their male counterparts, these stories become vital to Carver's working-class representations.

In "Fat", a waitress sits down with her friend Rita and tells her of an obese patron she served during an evening shift. While her coworkers poke fun at the fat man's appearance, the waitress insists he carries significance beyond his body. She constructs a myth around her interactions with the patron and conveys it to herself as a means to reflect on its implications. Furthermore, she uses storytelling to announce the content of her tale to the public. Within the myth itself, the fat man stands as the central figure. As a result of the waitress' ambiguous portrayal of his character, he serves as a symbol from which she draws a sense of power. Fueled by the positive associations evoked by the fat man, the waitress frames a story that takes issue with the imposing structures of her everyday. Although her life is marked by rigid and imposing structures, she retains a sense of agency through the story-telling act. Some argue that there is a fundamental stasis to the waitress myth as it doesn't provide any clear epiphanies or solutions to the challenges she faces. In my view, we must firstly recognize that the narrative in this short story exists because the waitress constructs and conveys it. Furthermore, the complex nature of her tale, despite the absence of a revelation, can be regarded as a significant effort to capture and reflect on an experience in a manner that is more attentive to the everyday of working-class women.

Whereas the waitress in "Fat" actively constructs a personal myth, the mother in "Why, Honey?" turns to deconstruct the idealization she formerly had of her son. Communicating through written word, she provides an account of her child's upbringing. Through a letter addressed to an unknown "Sir.", the mother makes the reader privy to the anti-social and violent behavior of her son. A compulsive liar already as a young child, the boy grows increasingly threatening. After a confrontation, mother and child stop speaking. The mother hides in exile and grows concerned for her safety as the son gains a position in politics. She casts herself and the son as the central characters of a story, where she ultimately rejects the ideals he comes to represent. Through her use of everyday language in writing, she communicates dissonance between her previous idealization of the son and her current position. The son's social mobility and success evokes associations to another subject in the American mythos: the self-made man. I see the mother's complex re-rendering of the son as a deconstruction of this ideal. Overall, the mother's story serves as a broader social commentary. In questioning the distance between herself and her child, she also addresses the dissonance between a popular American myth and the more complex reality of working-class women. Herein lies the rebellious and significant nature of the mother's use of myth. Not only

does she affirm her emotional capacity and agency through her tale, but she also raises questions which strike a central nerve in the cultural expectations reserved for working women.

"Fat"

The plot in "Fat" is conveyed through a conventional mode of storytelling. An unnamed waitress visits her friend Rita and tells her of an obese man she served during a slow shift. The waitress discerns something significant about the patron, which moves far beyond his appearance. Encouraged by the insights provided by this enigmatic figure, she assumes a positive outlook on the direction her life is taking. We can view the contents of the waitress' tale as a personal myth, where the fat man serves as the central character. Because of her mysterious portrayal of the patron, I argue we can read him as a constructed and richly meaningful symbol. The waitress appears to draw a sense of power from his figurative potential. Using his character through the storytelling act, she also takes issue with the power-imbalances which mark her everyday. Ultimately, it seems she has gained assurance through the construction and communication of her personal myth.

Critics often interpret the waitress' tale as a testament of emotional capacity. As Gentry argues, "Carver could write a story that makes the female mind seem complex. The best candidate for such work is the early story 'Fat'" (1993, 89). Ewing Campbell underlines how the Waitress' reflections on the fat man put emphasis on the "effect of this experience on her imagination" (1992, 12). As already suggested by the scholarly emphasis on the waitress' internal process, the myth she constructs is partly for her personal use. Entering a role as myth-maker, she stylizes past events in a way that enables her to emotionally confront and consider the subjects and events of an everyday episode. This supports the notion of storytelling as a device for personal contemplation, where situations undergo investigation by means of the imagination.

Furthermore, storytelling serves not only as a thinking-tool for the waitress. She also employs the medium in order to make the content of her personal myth a public concern. She overtly announces her myth to an audience and frames it as a tale, thus inviting a communal consideration of its subject matter:

> 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. (Carver 2009a, 3)

In this passage, the waitress' presentation of her tale coincides with Langeiler and Peterson's conception of storytelling as a "performance" and a "human communication practice" (2004, 2). At the opening of the story, the waitress puts emphasis on the act of "telling", which makes it clear that her myth is shared with another person. With Rita as her confidant, the waitress aims to convey her message to others. The statement "[h]ere is what I tell her" stands as an epigraph before the content of her myth is unveiled. As a result, the tale that follows does indeed take on the essence of a performance, as a kind of monologue or grand announcement. This way of announcing and framing the myth could evoke notions of grandeur. However, as seen in the women's casual attitudes, seated with coffee and cigaretes, it becomes clear that the unfolding of the waitress' myth arises in a distinctly everyday situation. Overall, the waitress' story-telling act stands not as an effort to separate or entertain something distinctly set apart from the mundane. Instead, she is framing and presenting a piece of past experience through performative tools. We can read this as a means to communicate the contents of personal myth to a community, and thus confront its implications in unison.

Presenting and Structuring a Myth

Before addressing the content of the waitress' myth, I want to underline how it is structured. "Fat" is presented as a narrative within a narrative. At the first level, the waitress and Rita are sitting down in present time. The waitress' myth unfolds at a secondary level, as a tale concerned with the afternoon she served the fat man and the following evening she spends with Rudy in their shared home. I identify the waitress' myth as the paragraphs between the declaration of her tale, "here is what I tell her" (3), and the conclusion five pages later, marked by Rita's response: "[t]hat's a funny story" (7). Within this space, the characters and events fall under the waitress' jurisdiction, as she assumes the role of mythmaker. Remembering my definition of Carverian myths, we can assume that the flesh of her tale is based on actual past events. However, these undergo an aestheticization as the waitress consciously chooses how to stylize, present, and frame her material. In short, we can identify the waitress' personal myth in the conscious re-articulation of an ostensibly ordinary episode. The remaining text framing her myth is set outside the waitress' control. Therefore, these segments of the narrative can be read as commentary on, rather than subject to, the construction of her personal myth.

Within the waitress' myth, the fat man serves as the essential component. Initially, this is communicated through the structure of the myth itself. The main part of her tale remains

stationary in its fixation on the fat man as its central subject, the restaurant as the predominant setting, and the duration of serving the patron as the main frame of time. There is some movement to her tale, as we follow her home upon the conclusion of her shift (6). Still, her myth remains mostly stationary in its focus on the fat man, setting, and timeframe. As a result, the fat man is augmented as the nucleus of her myth. The amplitude of his physical presence is extended in a figurative claim to space in the waitress' story. Fixed at the center of our attention through the layout of her tale, he functions as a supporting beam to the construction of her myth.

Although the fat man remains at the center of the waitress' myth, other characters are featured. This includes herself, boyfriend and co-worker Rudy, as well as the other workers she interacts with throughout her shift. As opposed to her presentation of the fat man, these secondary characters are not subject to the same fixation outlined above, nor the stylization I will address later on. However, I would argue that they still serve as part of her mythos. Once transplanted into the mythical realm, all subjects included can be read as reflective of broader attributes. For instance, the waitress illustrates the power of imagination, as she champions the importance of the patron's figurative potential. In juxtaposition, her co-workers can be collapsed into an embodiment of the critical voices which surround waitress and fat man alike. Lastly, her boyfriend and coworker Rudy exudes toxic masculinity. Overall, the subjects surrounding the fat man are not as stylized, but can also be seen as reflective of broader themes.

Creating a Mythical Figure

Having considered how the waitress structures her myth, we can direct our attention to her portrayal of the fat man in closer detail. Indeed, the way in which the waitress stylizes the patron transforms him from a person to a mythical figure. Although the waitress focuses on the allure of his physique in her presentation, this seems to reflect an underlying mystery to the fat man's nature, which goes beyond his proportions:

> It is late of a slow Wednesday when Herb seats the fat man at my station.
>
> This fat man is the fattest person I have ever seen, though he is neat-appearing and well dressed enough. Everything about him is big. But it is the fingers I remember best. When I stop at the table near his to see to the old couple, I first notice the fingers. They look three times the size of a normal person's fingers – long, thick, creamy fingers. (3)

In this passage, the otherwise mundane nature of the "slow Wednesday" creates a backdrop which pronounces the allure of the fat man. His uniqueness is stressed by the waitress; he is not just large, but "the fattest" person she has ever seen. Conjuring the image of his fingers, she makes him appear almost unearthly, as they stand "three times the size of a normal person's fingers". Although the waitress stresses the unusual size of the patron's body, his physical dimensions never appear carnivalesque or vulgar, but rather compelling. Her use of the words "long", "thick", and "creamy" to describe the fat man's hands make them seem delicate. The waitress also notes how he is "neat-appearing", and thus adds a sense of extravagance to his character. As she states that "everything" about him is big, we understand that the patron is not just physically great. This sentiment seems to apply to the very essence his character. Overall, it is not really the size of the fat man that becomes pronounced in the waitress' portrayal. It is his otherness, and the compelling and extravagant nature of this otherness.

In line with the fat man's engrossing presence, critics have already noted his figurative potential. For instance, Lionel Kelly suggests parallels between the fat man and motherhood, pronounced by his use of "we" instead of "I"; "'[w]e' implies plurality and in this story intimates the doubleness of the 'we' in sexual union, and the implications of pregnancy" (Kelly 2001, 227). Indeed, the fat man can easily be associated with the physical impact of childbearing. As implied by his size, there is the appearance of an enlarged stomach. In addition, his insatiable appetite, which remains a subject throughout the story, is also often associated with pregnant women (4). In my view, we can extend the associations between the fat man and pregnancy beyond physical markers. He also appears to represent a figurative and emotional fertility. The waitress concludes her story with the statement "[m]y life is going to change. I feel it" (7). Because this final reflection is tightly connected to her thoughts on the patron, he comes to reflect feelings of hope and expectation. The waitress' wording of her final remark, where her optimism becomes something she physically feels, evokes the notion of a kicking baby. However, it is not necessarily an actual child she is bearing. Instead, one could argue that the waitress is "pregnant" with the thought of the fat man, and thus the positive feelings he comes to represent.

As already implied by his connection to pregnancy and the female form, the fat man embodies a softer expression of masculinity. He breaks with the logic of patriarchal domination, representing instead a member of the opposite sex the waitress feels equal to:

> Anyway, I am so keyed up or something, I knock over his glass of water.
>
> I'm so sorry, I say. It always happens when you get into a hurry. I'm very sorry, I say. Are you all right? I say. I'll get the boy to clean up right away, I say.
>
> It's nothing, he says. It's all right, he says, and he puffs. don't worry about it, we don't mind he says. He smiles and waves as I go off to get Leander. (4)

Here, the waitress' urgent concern over the spill implies the type of response to failure she expects from the typical male customer. Instead of affirming her anticipations, the fat man deescalates the situation. Where her staccato apologies underline regret, he replies with a similarly constructed sentence, marked by a multitude of reassurances. His smile and wave further imply emotional concern for the waitress. The overall impression from this interaction is that although the waitress is serving the fat man, there is a sense of equality between them. We can juxtapose this to the more lopsided power dynamic between the waitress and other male figures of her myth. For instance, she serves a party of four businessmen who are "very demanding" (3). Rudy works in the kitchen and takes her orders "with a face" (3). Nesset argues that for the waitress "the fat man represents to her everything Rudy lacks. Polite, articulate, and 'well-dressed,' the fat man is the token of a kind of opulence – and gracious affability" (1991, 298). I would add that the patron reflects something absent not only from Rudy, but the male figures in the waitress' tale in general. What makes the fat man compelling is not necessarily his associations to wealth or extravagance. In my view, it is the soft and nurturing expression of masculinity he exudes. Ultimately, he offers the waitress a rare experience of equality with a male subject.

One should note that the symbolic potential of the fat man is not necessarily connected to his actual person. He becomes extraordinary in the waitress' myth, because she lends him mystery in her rendering:

> Where are you from? I ask him. I don't believe I've seen you before, I say.
>
> He's not the kind of person you'd forget, Rita puts in with a snicker.
>
> Denver, he says.
>
> I don't say anything more on the subject, though I am curious. (4)

There is a tension between the real person the fat man is, and the mythical figure the waitress constructs in her retelling of past events. Although the waitress is curious about the fat man,

she chooses to leave his private life a mystery. Of course, attaining too much personal knowledge would deflate the symbolic potential the fat man holds. The waitress chooses not to make him a person, because his purpose in the myth is that of a token rather than a fleshed out character. This becomes a marker of the waitress' active construction of a mythical figure. Where her co-workers become hung up on the physical appearance of the fat man, she argues "he is fat…but that is not the whole story" (6). Overall, it appears that the waitress is lending the fat man mystery in order to establish a ground for symbolic reflections. As we will see, the fat man serves as a kind of figurative countermeasure to the lopsided power dynamics that otherwise mark her daily routine.

Addressing Power Structures Through Storytelling

In order to address these power dynamics, we can consider the story-telling act more closely. As the waitress rearticulates and frames her encounter with the fat man, she also takes issue with the structures which frame her everyday. Nesset argues she is attracted to the fat man, who feels he has no choice but to eat, because "she too is at the mercy of her world, oppressed by a husband and work environment insensitive to her needs" (1991, 299). Indeed, the hierarchical nature of her everyday makes a notable imprint on her narrative. For instance, she explains that the fat man is seated at "my station", alluding to the compartmentalized groups assigned to each waitperson at her workplace (3). Although the fat man catches her attention, she remains obligated to the other patrons assigned to her post. She serves businessmen, groups of friends, and elderly couples alike (3). Upon taking the fat man's order, the waitress underlines how she must "hurry away" to the kitchen, indicating the hectic nature of her workday (3). Her partner Rudy works in the kitchen, and the waitress underlines his harsh demeanor, as she relays him speaking with his "apron and hat off" (6). The small digressions the waitress includes in her story reveals the rigid arrangements to which she remains confined in her everyday. Although she has little power to change these arrangements, she retains some agency as she reiterates them through her tale. When she makes these structures subject to her narrative, she switches roles from server to story-teller, retaining a sense of agency in the process.

Moving on to other structures the waitress confronts through storytelling, we can recognize her efforts to resist objectification. At this point, the objectifying act has proven itself a recurring theme in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* especially at the expense of female characters. Remembering Nussbaum's definition once more, objectification is the "making into a thing, treating as a thing, something that is not really a thing" (1995, 257). It is

reasonable to assume the waitress has experienced this type of reduction. Consequently, she remains persistent in challenging her co-worker's treatment of the fat man as a mere body. This effort is crystalized towards the conclusion of her tale, where she has finished her shift and returned home with Rudy:

> As if he's been thinking about it, Rudy says, I knew a fat guy once, a couple of fat guys, really fat guys, when I was a kid. They were tubbies, my God. I don't remember their names. Fat, that's the only name this one kid had. We called him Fat, the kid who lived next door to me, he was a neighbor. The other kid came along later. His name was Wobbly. Everybody called him Wobbly except the teachers. Wobbly and Fat. Wish I had their pictures, Rudy says. (6)

As seen here, Rudy tells a story within the waitress' story. However, the effect of the myth he constructs and the manner in which he presents his material diverge considerably from the mechanics of the waitresses' tale. Where she avoids lending the fat man too much personal depth, this is to establish a sense of mystery and allow his function as an ambiguous symbol. In Rudy's story, the characters included are objectified, as they only serve as atypical bodies. Firstly, he comes across as disrespectful rather than curious, referring to the childhood acquaintances as "tubbies" instead of using their actual names. The unimaginative naming of one child as "Fat", a simple parallel to his physical appearance, creates a rather shallow image. Ultimately, the function of Wobbly and Fat in Rudy's story seem simply to be that of antic objects. This is reinforced as Rudy wishes he had their pictures. Instead of considering their significance as characters, he simply wants to reexperience the visual effect of their figures. The waitress appears to reject Rudy's objectifying logic. Adding the phrase "[a]s if he's been thinking about it" as an epigraph to his story, she suggests that the ensuing tale is mindless, or at least not adequately thought out.

Finally, Rudy commits an act of sexual violence at the conclusion of the story. As the waitress is raped by her boyfriend, the gravity of patriarchal domination stands as a last structure she includes and confronts in her narrative. In tangent with Rudy's transgression, we can also observe the symbolic potential of the fat man come to full fruition:

> I get into bed and move clear over the edge and lie there on my stomach. But right away, as soon as he turns off the light and gets into bed, Rudy begins. I turn on my back and relax some, though it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am ter-

> rifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all. (7)

True to form, the waitress alludes to a figurative rather than literal fatness in her reiteration of the rape. This showcases how the figure of the fat man becomes a source of strength in a confrontation otherwise marked by the violation of her agency. As Gentry writes, "the narrator imagines herself taking on a more powerful selfhood from the fat man's example" (1993, 89). We can address her experience of "a more powerful selfhood" in several ways. There is the obvious sense of greatness in terms of size relations, as the waitress experiences herself as bigger than Rudy. This marks a shift in the power dynamic between the couple. Whereas Rudy often looms as an oppressive force in the waitress' everyday, he now becomes but a "tiny thing" she can hardly notice. Her sense of amplitude also works as a trick at Rudy's expense. Despite expressing scorn and disgust toward the fat man and the subjects of his story, he is nevertheless sexually aroused by a person who experiences themselves as "terrifically fat". Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, the waitress' imagined fatness becomes antithetical to the experience of confinement she is regularly subject to. This seems directly intertwined with the image of the fat man. He is overflowing, in terms of physical size, but also in his vast symbolic projections, be it of mystery, fertility, or soft masculinity. Similarly, the waitress moves "clear over the edge" of the bed and feels herself figuratively expand. In so doing, she breaks with and transgresses the boundaries which normally confine her by means of her imagination.

As we have seen, the waitress creates a myth, conveys it through a story and employs it to confront power structures. In my view, much of the purpose of her tale lies within the very act of this construction. This sentiment coincides with the principles of Wittgenstein's language philosophy. Rather than assuming that "meaning is an 'it' existing apart from use" we can approach meaning and use as interconnected concepts (Moi 2017, 39). Correspondingly, we can recognize the waitress' active fashioning of a narrative from the fabric of her ordinary life. Through the "use" of an everyday episode, the waitress retains a sense of agency despite the set arrangements imposed on her. In my views, many critics fail to recognize the significance of this use. Nesset considers that "the passive role she plays in bed – and the sense of the story's close" implies "the waitress will not act but will continue to be acted upon; she is programmed to see her life in those terms" (1991, 301). Gareth Cornwell is similarly pessimistic, arguing that the waitress "can neither understand nor learn from what seems potentially significant in their own experience" (2005, 345).

In my view, these readings pay little attention to the waitress' creation of a personal myth and the storytelling she employs to present it. Claiming that the waitress is "programmed" to stay passive and unable to comprehend seems irresolvable with the fact that the whole narrative in "Fat" exists due to her active framing and articulation of past events. Firstly, she is very much active as the creator of her own personal myth. Secondly, her efforts to convey its contents both to herself and others suggest that she is fully able to discern the weight of her narrative. There is little the waitress can do to resolve her economical position as a working class-woman. What she can do—and does—is to create and convey a tale which helps her retain a sense of agency and confront the structures that affect her. As I see it, the waitress' use of an everyday episode as material for her personal myth and her expression of its contents should be recognized. Ultimately, these acts stand as pivotal markers of her agency and emotional capacity.

The pessimistic readings of "Fat" potentially connect to the absence of a concrete epiphany in the waitress' myth. As I see it, Wittgenstein offers a more fruitful approach to her tale, which recognizes complexity in the absence of concrete revelation. The concluding lines of the waitress' tale suggest she gains an ambiguous, although seemingly positive outlook on her life:

> That's a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she doesn't
> know what to make of it.
> I feel depressed. But I won't go into it with her. I've already
> told her too much.
> She sits there waiting, her dainty fingers poking her hair.
> *Waiting for what?* I'd like to know.
> It is August.
> My life is going to change. I feel it. (7)

Critics of the waitress' tale, be they fictitious or scholarly, often deflate its value in search for some ultimate truth or epiphany. As seen in this passage, the waitress expresses frustration at this type of outlook. When she concludes her narrative, Rita's response to the "funny story" proves sorely disappointing to the waitress who "can see she doesn't know what to make of it". Rita's "waiting" suggests she expects something more concrete from the myth. The waitress rejects her expectation of a clearly articulated epiphany as she muses *"*[*w*]*aitin*g *for what?* I'd like to know". Not dissimilarly to Rita's judgement, Nesset argues that "the waitress' story, like her vision of amplitude, does little to illuminate her on the dire matter of her unhappiness" (1991, 300). If we look to what is implied in the waitress' conclusion, instead of what is absent, her final statement is vague, but also potentially hopeful. Her last

line is strikingly poetic: “[m]y life is going to change. I feel it”. This sentiment seems to coincide with the mythical figure she has created. Much like the fat man, her closing statement can be read both as symbolic and evocative of positive associations.

In my view, the weight and importance of the waitress’ tale can be discerned within this ambiguity, not discarded because of it. Despite the of absence of a clearly stated meaning to her tale, I argue that the she has communicated something very much worth listening to: a myth that coincides more closely with the complex reality of working-class women than the hegemonic narratives upheld by society as a whole. As Anne Enright interprets “Fat”, “we feel its force and resonance” but “it is often hard to say what a story means” (2010, 1). From this she discerns that “the most we can say, perhaps, is that a short story is about a moment in life; and that, after this moment, we realize something has changed” (ibid.). In Wittgensteinian spirit, Enright helps us recognize the relevance of the waitress’ story despite its denial of a clearly articulated epiphany. Indeed, as the waitress concludes her tale, she directs a hopeful glance to the possibilities of her future. Although these possibilities are not clearly defined, she finds the resources to go on. This determination stems from the waitress herself, as she has utilized the power of her imagination and directed its produce both at herself and others. Ultimately, the waitress in “Fat” offers us a mythical lore that appears refreshingly considerate of the interests of working class-women.

“Why, Honey?”

“Why, Honey?” unfolds through a mother’s letter on the violent and disconcerting behavior of her son, the nature of which intensifies as the boy grows into a man. When her child gains a powerful position within politics, the mother hides away due to concerns for her safety. Initially, one might question how this story can be empowering for the main character. The mother often acts in tangent with conservative gender roles and expectations. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of a concerned mother with a violent and enigmatic son arguably renders a traditional or essentialist portrayal of gender. Gentry questions the mode of female representation in the narrative, arguing that “all the men in the story seem part of a complex conspiracy that the reasonable woman cannot hope to overcome” (1993, 89). In my view, it is not fair to expect the mother to understand her son’s anti-social behavior. The true origins of his nature appear fundamentally inaccessible, because he breaks with conventional understandings of social-codes. Therefore, we cannot read the mother’s responding bafflement to her son as an indicator of lacking intelligence or understanding. On the contrary, her use of myth and storytelling offers a strong indicator of emotional capacity.

Utilizing the unfolding of her everyday as a parent as material, she frames a story. Through rearticulating past events, she confronts the ideals her son comes to stand for. If we consider this story in tangent with "Fat", there are similarities and discrepancies to address.

The treatment of myth in this story differs from that in "Fat". Whereas the first story demonstrates the active construction of a personal myth, the mother in question turns to deconstruct an idealization she subscribed to in the past. As discussed above, the waitress lends ambiguity to the central male figure of her tale, because he proves valuable as a symbol of figurative ideas. Using the fat man as a bearing structure, she builds a personal myth. This process is marked by an idealization, particularly of the fat man. In "Why, Honey?" we can trace the opposite effect. Here, the mother deconstructs the glorified conception she previously had of her son. As opposed to the waitress' mysterious rendering of the central male character, the mother chooses to deflate the symbolic potential of her son by introducing her personal knowledge into the narrative. Although the mother's use of myth is near antithetical to that of the waitress, the effect of her story is not dissimilar. In both narratives, the female storytellers use personal myths as a foundation for broader social commentary. The waitress fashions and communicates a tale that recognizes the complexity of her everyday as a working-class woman. Through her letter, the mother deconstructs the personal myth of her son, which she previously subscribed to. This disassembly proves effective not only in challenging her personal beliefs, but also the myth of the self-made man. We can read the distance portrayed between mother and son in the letter as emblematic of the distance between blue-collar women and this popular American figure.

The women in "Fat" and "Why, Honey?" also structure their stories differently. In my view, the differing setups of each tale connects to the opposing approaches to their personal myths. As noted above, the waitress' story is relatively static. The fat man remains the focal point of her tale, where the fixation on his character underlines his significance as a symbol. In contrast, the mother's story unfolds more like a journey. Roughly following her son's development from child to adult, she moves forward in a sequential fashion. As I see it, we can read the dynamic structuring of the mother's tale as reflective of the process of detachment she sets in motion. As she writes, she traces a transition from the idealized conception she once had of her son, and the more realistic perspective she has gained in the present. Resolving these two outlooks, she separates herself not only from her offspring, but also the broader ideals he comes to stand for. Overall, the waitress' narrative in "Fat" orbits around the fat man, because he serves as the genesis of a personal myth which offers her a resource. In this story, the mother moves away from the central male subject of her tale. In her

case, the separation from and deconstruction of the myth he embodies becomes the source of empowerment. Overall, we can read the narrative as the mother investigating and questioning her subjective perceptions by deconstructing a myth she previously subscribed to.

Lastly, in addition to their differing treatment of personal myths, there is the obvious difference in the modes of storytelling demonstrated in "Fat" and "Why, Honey?". The waitress orally declares and presents her tale, and thus coincides with traditional conceptions of storytelling. The mother conveys her story through a written account. Still, there are important similarities in her presentation. Although the mother aims to deconstruct a personal myth, she still participates in a stylization of past events much like the waitress. At the start of her letter, she presents two pivotal characters, a central conflict, as well as an underlying intent to her tale:

> Dear Sir:
>
> I was so surprised to receive your letter asking about my son, how did you know I was here? I moved here years ago right after it started to happen. No one knows who I am here but I'm afraid all the same. Who I am afraid of is him. When I look at the paper I shake my head and wonder. I read what they write about him and I ask myself is that really my son, is he really doing these things? (Carver 2009g, 129)

Set in present day, the opening of the mother's letter clearly establishes the central subjects of her tale. She casts herself as a mother in exile. Her emphasis on fear and social isolation suggests that this character is rendered to evoke sympathy. In turn, the son comes across as antithetical to the daunted mother. Although the nature of his person or actions is not clearly stated, he serves as the ominous origin of his parent's despair. Furthermore, the mother identifies the source of conflict in her story, namely the "it" which has "started to happen". Although this articulation is ambiguous, it seemingly refers to the son's negative development. This is further suggested by the detachment the mother describes from her child in the present day. He has simply become a person she reads about in the paper, whose relation to herself she finds incomprehensible. We understand the severity of past events, which have been grave enough to completely sever the bond between parent and offspring. Finally, the mother's inquiry, "I ask myself is that really my son, is he really doing these things," points to the intent of her tale. Through her narrative, the mother is questioning what her son has become. Initially, she directs the query at herself, suggesting that the examination through storytelling will be an internal mental process. However, as seen in the letter

addressed to a “Sir”, the mother is also aiming to communicate her tale and its implications to others. This demonstrates how, much like in “Fat”, the mother engages in the storytelling act as a means both to reflect on and communicate the content of her story.

Confronting a Personal Myth

In the mother’s story, the tension between the personal myth of her son and the reality of his character remains the central theme. This is effectively communicated through the use of her everyday language in writing. Where Gentry mentions the “ungrammatical” execution of her letter, I would argue her non-standard writing calls for further scrutiny (1993, 89). The mother’s writing effectively communicates the conflicting emotions surrounding her son. For instance, the cumbersomely passive sentence “[w]ho I am afraid of is him” speaks to the difficulty she experiences in recognizing the fear of her child (129). As she recalls a neighbor’s suspicion about her son torturing the family cat, her written word communicates similar inner conflict: “[n]o, that’s just not so, he wouldn’t do a thing like that, he loved Trudy, Trudy has been in the family for years, no, it wasn’t my son” (129). Here, the speech-like construction of the sentence, with the repetition of denial-words along with Trudy’s name, echo the circulation of a concerned thought in the mind. Although it appears the mother knows the truth about Trudy’s demise, she finds it impossible to crystalize through written acknowledgment, choosing instead to muddle it in vague formulations. In another example, the tension between the mother’s love for her son and his problematic conduct appears particularly clear, where she describes him as “a good boy except for his outbursts and that he could not tell the truth” (129). Here, the clunky conjunction of the subject and direct object accompanies the discrepancy between the mother’s optimistic view of her child and the more austere reality of his character. As I see it, these examples underline how the “ungrammatical” aspects of the mother’s everyday language become key in addressing the complicated emotions connected to her son. As the mother’s previously idealistic view of the child proves semantically irresolvable with his actions, his mythical potential is deflated.

The disintegration of the ideal son if further reflected in his inability to coincide with the gender roles assigned by the mother in her story. Because she is a single parent, it appears she encourages the boy to serve as a replacement husband. He proves unable to practice the mutual love and respect implied in such an arrangement:

> The night he was to draw his first check I cooked his favorite supper and had everything on the table when he walked in.

> Here's the man of the house, I said, hugging him. I am so proud, how much did you draw, honey? Eighty dollars, he said. I was flabbergasted. That's wonderful, honey, I just can -not believe it, I'm starved he said, let's eat. (130)

As the mother prepares for the son's return from his first paying job, she mimics the roles and stereotypes connected to an ideal nuclear family. Dinner is set and ready for the boy's homecoming, and the mother overtly calls him the man of the house. When he reveals he has made eighty dollars, the ideal image the mother has tried to conjure begins to tear at the seams. The high salary is a probable lie, and suggests the boy has no reservations about deceiving his parent. Strain is further underlined by the opposing emotional conduct of the characters. Whereas the mother is eager to show affection, the son remains emotionally stunted and bluff. As a response to the mother's excitement, the boy pushes his inclination to eat rather than to speak and engage. In the mother's re-telling, the son exhausts his mythical potential through his refusal to engage in the idealistic narrative she invites.

One might argue that the mother's efforts to establish traditional gender roles within her story suggest an inclination towards patriarchal domination. In my view, the ambition at the heart of her casting is the opposite. A functional marriage can serve as the foundation for equality and respect between two parts. It appears this is what the mother wants:

> You are nearly grown now but I am still responsible and I feel I am entitled to some respect and consideration and have tried to be fair and honest with you. I want the truth, honey, that's all I've ever asked from you, the truth. (132)

Here, the mother confronts her teenage son after he lashes out with the threat of physical violence. The confrontation makes up the longest paragraph in her letter and stands as a clear expression of her wishes. The mother defines a problematic disequilibrium between her and the son. Whereas she feels she is fair and honest, the son is never truthful in return. As I see it, this suggests that her desire is not to reestablish a traditional family pattern or to adhere to the communal expectations directed at her as a family provider. She is merely asking to be treated with dignity. When the son asks her to kneel as a response, he makes it clear that he will only accept her in a submissive state (132). For the mother, this becomes an irresolvable breaking point not only for the family, but also for the personal myth she has built around her son. Where she offers him the means to coincide with her idealization as an honest, loving and respectful child, the son persistently demonstrates a refusal, or perhaps inability, to coincide

with his mother's wishes. As a result, the mother chooses to detach herself from the idea of a perfect child, and come to grips with the sinister nature of her offspring.

Deconstructing the Self-Made Man

Once the mother-son connection is broken, the mother's portrayal of her child changes. The paragraphs of her letter grow shorter, her language is less impacted by emotional concern, and the descriptions of the son become brief and matter of fact. Indeed, there is a transformation of the boy's character in the mother's tale. Whereas she lends the son some ambiguity as a child, she becomes much more critical of his character as he grows into a man. We can compare the mother's portrayal of the older son to the image of the self-made man. Louis B. Wright describes this mythical figure as follows:

> In the folklore of the United States, the most persistent and popular hero has not been some type of Robin Hood or Davy Crockett, but the self-made man, the man who rose from low to high estate and became a personage of wealth and substance. This hero's rise came about through no whim of fate or piece of luck; it was always the result of the cultivation of virtues. (1955, 139)

As seen in Wright's description, the self-made man leaves nothing up to chance. This mythical figure becomes the embodiment of pristine conduct. Success is always the fruit of hard labor, as opposed to coincidence or circumstance. In the story, the son enjoys comparable social mobility. He goes to college, finds a wife, and is elected governor (133). At a surface level, the boy is a success story, having come far from his working-class origins. As seen in the mother's portrayal of his character as an adult, he can easily be associated with this mythical figure. In terms of morality, however, the son's behavior appears antithetical to the "cultivation of virtues" Wright underlines as necessary.

If we further scrutinize the dissonance between the son and the self-made man, we can recognize how the mother uses her story to deconstruct and question this ideal. For example, the boy's success in politics becomes ominous as the mother discloses his fundamental dishonesty. Already as a young child, she recalls his ability to lie with vivid detail (130). Similarly, the son's marriage and newfound position of power is disconcerting as the mother makes us privy to his brutality. As mentioned above, his torturing of the family cat appears particularly sinister. Trudy is "cut up" and has firecrackers placed in her ears and private parts (129). The mother also notes the son's purchase of a shotgun and a hunting knife (130). In an especially alarming episode, she retrieves a blood-soaked shirt from the trunk of

his car, the origin of which is never revealed (131). The mother chooses to include this knowledge in the construction of her tale, effectively challenging any idealized image of her son. At a surface level, he represents the American dream. For those who hear the mother's story, the reality is much more malevolent.

The mother's challenging of the self-made man myth becomes a central aspect of her tale. Although she can provide no definite answers to address her son's nature, her inquiry is valuable in itself. On his compulsion to tell lies, the mother simply states, "I can't give you any reasons" (129). As she muses over his emotional unavailability, she writes that "I keep asking myself why but I don't have the answer. Why, honey?" (132). Here, the title of the story is echoed through a question directed at the son, and it remains unresolved. The lack of answers provided by the mother has led some critics to question the efficacy of her story. Gentry argues the mother's bewilderment suggests "she doesn't achieve depth of mind comparable to that of men" (1993, 89). Ultimately, the son comes to represent an emotional and physical reality that she simply cannot access. This is not related to the mother's "depth of mind", but rather to the fact that her son's behavior fundamentally breaks with her ethics and world view. In my view, the lack of answers in the mother's story communicates more than answers necessarily would. In line with Wittgenstein, the provenance of her tale lies not in a revelation of some ultimate truth, but rather in the use it serves (Moi 2017, 35). Remembering the waitress in "Fat", she uses the construction and communication of her personal myth to take issue with the structures of her everyday. Similarly, the mother relays a tale to question her son and values he comes to represent. Overall, it appears personal myths in Carver arise in an effort to provide meaning at the face of challenges with no clear solution. The contrasting use of myth discussed above highlight how such idealizations can both aid and prevent deeper understanding. Still, both stories demonstrate how the active use of myth and storytelling offers a resource to Carver's female subjects.

If we accept the value of the mother's inquiry, we can read the impenetrable nature of her son's character beyond a reflection on their personal relationship. The self-made man has served as a popular figure within the American mythos. However, this ideal offers little representation for working-class women. For the son, academic achievement offers a means to get ahead. As the mother muses, "he was an excellent student, you know that about him if you know anything" (130). We don't learn of her performance in school, but it seems reasonable to assume that the type of social mobility the son attains was never an option for her. By extension, the son's position of power is not only unavailable to the mother, but also directly harmful for her. Forced into hiding in present day, she writes, "I should be proud but I

am afraid" (133). Her tale serves as a broader social commentary, where the distance between mother and son becomes emblematic of the dissonance between the self-made man ideal and the more complex reality of working-class women. In this sense, "Why, Honey?" serves as a personal narrative constructed to challenge a hegemonic myth. As the mother takes issue with the idealization of her son, she also underlines how the myth of the self-made man is not only unattainable but also potentially harmful to working women. Based on the idea of social mobility as accessible simply through determination, it blatantly ignores the challenges posed both by gender-norms and socio-economic circumstance. Furthermore, the ideal of the self-made man glorifies conceptions of masculine power, a celebration which potentially purports a gender disequilibrium.

Recognizing the Story-Telling Act

This bring us to the story-telling act, which is key in enabling the mother to process her feelings and deconstruct the personal myth she has built around of the son. As she authors her letter, she chronicles the difficult unfolding of her everyday as a parent. The letter communicates an emotional journey, which at its conclusion, allows her to separate completely from the son and the problematic connotations he carries. As seen above, the mother initially defends him after her neighbor accuses him of attacking Trudy (129). She expresses pride as he returns from his first paying job (130). She is concerned for his grades in high school (130). However, as the boy grows increasingly threatening and violent, the mother starts to confront him. She hates seeing weapons in the house, and openly tells her son (130). She expresses her disdain for his lies because they presuppose she is "too old and stupid" to debunk them (132). After a particularly intense quarrel, she decides to "treat him like a lodger unless he wanted to mend his ways" (132). As the mother's letter reaches its conclusion, the son drifts away, serving as a vague memory she is reminded of only in public outlets: "I have never seen him again. Oh sure I have seen him on the TV and I have seen his pictures in the paper" (133). Parental love is clearly expressed in the emotional concern she invests in the son as a child and adolescent. Still, his behavior as a teenager and young adult signify the formation of ethics the mother cannot condone. In the apogee of her narrative, the mother draws a clear boundary between herself and what her son has become. Thus, the story-telling act, here executed through writing, serves as a powerful internal effort on the mother's part. As she frames her narrative, she embarks on an inner journey where she confronts and ultimately separates herself from a person whose corrupted nature she cannot accept. This

demonstrates how, much like in “Fat”, the story-telling act stands as a marker of emotional capacity.

The mother’s storytelling serves not only as a vantagepoint for personal reflection. It also provides as a tool to communicate her story outward and remonstrate public opinion. As a single mother, she is vulnerable to a community quick to insert her in narratives she has no control over. This connects to the cultural expectations held for working-class women. Rita Felski states that “many of the values and attitudes traditionally associated with the lower middle class are also identified with women: domesticity, prudency, aspirations toward refinement” (2000b, 43). These aspirations seem to ring true for the mother, who is not just attempting to manage her son, but also the public opinion directed at her:

> Mrs. Cooper who lives behind us came the next
> evening to tell me Trudy crawled into her backyard that
> afternoon to die. Trudy was cut up she said but she recognized
> Trudy. Mr. Cooper buried the remains.
> Cut up? I said. What do you mean cut up?
> Mr. Cooper saw two boys in the field putting firecrackers in
> Trudy’s ears and in her you know what. He tried to stop them
> but they ran.
> Who, who would do such a thing, did he see who it was?
> He didn’t know the other boy but one of them ran this way.
> Mr. Cooper thought it was your son. (129)

In this passage, we can view the Coopers as representative of the mother’s surrounding community. The Coopers live “behind” her, with the preposition creating a sense of them looking over her. The interaction between the mother and her neighbors further underlines the notion of being surveilled. Mrs. Cooper comes over to “tell” about Trudy, and Mr. Cooper presents the teenagers assaulting the cat like a witness-report. The son’s torturing Trudy becomes particularly taboo as it includes sexual violence. Indeed, his atypical behavior radically breaks with the prudency and refinement associated with working-class women. The ultimate judgment is thus not directed at the child, but the mother, who has failed to maintain her family within the strict parameters of decency expected of her. Overall, the eyes and ears of the mother’s surrounding community loom in the background of her narrative. The mother gets a job for the son through word of mouth (129) and the letter is addressed to a “Sir” of unknown origin (129). Therefore the story-telling act becomes a vital way for her to control her narrative. When she communicates her tale through the letter, she counteracts the stories told about her.

Finally, the mother's story-telling act stands as a revolt against the son, and the nefarious conduct he comes to stand for. Mimicking a popular American ideal at surface level, the son could have enjoyed sovereignty in communicating a false and idealized narrative about himself. If we consider his position of power, this type of jurisdiction would be especially precarious. As mentioned above, the mother addresses her letter to an unnamed "Sir." (129). We can interpret this anonymous recipient as representative of the general public. Indeed, she recognizes the importance of sharing her story. At the conclusion the letter, she writes "I wanted someone to know. I am very ashamed" (133). Although the content of the mother's story is marked by taboo and remorse, she still chooses to bare her tale to the outside world. Once her tale has been introduced to the public, transgressing the confines of inner reflection and entering into a collective sphere, any idealistic portrayal of the son becomes impossible. This demonstrates how the mother, despite her subverted and secluded position in the present day, finds an avenue for revolt through the story-telling act.

Overall, I argue that the rebellious aspects of "Why, Honey?" should be recognized. As I see it, the mother demonstrates considerable efforts to revolt through the deconstruction both of her personal myth and the communal myth of the self-made man. Some may argue that the mother's endeavor is obscured by her compliance with more traditional conceptions of gender and the expectations these harbor. In my view, this complicates the mother's story, but never renders it defunct. As mentioned above, the construction and communication of myth through storytelling can be seen as a performance. Elin Diamond argues all performances emerge "within a complex matrix of power-serving diverse cultural desires" and "encourages a permeable understanding of history and change" (1996, 2). Indeed, the mother's deconstruction of a personal myth, as well as her story-telling, unfold within a specific social context. The complexity of her point of reference should not take away from the central elements of her tale. Firstly, she takes issue with the personal myth she has built around her son. In so doing, she also challenges the myth of the self-made man, and questions the distance between this ideal and the reality of working-class women. Finally, the story-telling act stands as an act of revolt against the son and the harmful ideas he comes to stand for. In line with Wittgenstein, much of the provenance of the mother's tale lies within this use. The mother is not aiming to define some ultimate truth or explanation. Instead, the effect of her letter stands as an act of revolt, both against the problematic ethics of her own offspring, and the broader social implications he comes to represent as an adult.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the use of personal myths and storytelling in "Fat" and "Why, Honey?". The waitress in "Fat" casts a patron as the central subject of her myth. She consciously portrays him as an ambiguous symbol that she draws power from. Through the story-telling act, she takes issue with the structures of her everyday, and retains a sense of agency despite the set nature of her circumstances. In "Why, Honey?" the mother's letter offers a means to deconstruct the personal myth she has built around her son. By extension, this narrative disassembly serves as a challenging of the self-made man ideal. The mother raises an important inquiry as to what this popular figure of the American mythos can offer working-class women. Ultimately, the personal myth she deconstructs and her use of storytelling serves as a revolt against the son and the hegemonic ideals he comes to represent.

As we have seen, these narratives demonstrate oppositional approaches to personal myths. However, the effect of "Fat" and "Why, Honey?" is comparable. Firstly, these narratives stand as rare testaments to the emotional capacity of Carver's female working-class subjects. The fictitious women in his early work are often reduced and subjected to the narratives of male counterparts. In the stories above, the female characters enjoy the opportunity to frame and present their own tales. Furthermore, both stories illustrate how events arising in the everyday can be the valid subject of mythologies. Instead of alluding to hegemonic and collectively constructed myths, the mother and the waitress turn to the provenance of personal experience in order to fashion their narratives. In line with Wittgenstein's language philosophy, the weight and significance of these stories seems to reveal itself when we consider the importance of use in and of itself. In both "Fat" and "Why, Honey?" the female characters use their stories to take issue not only with their individual experience, but also their socioeconomic circumstances as working-class women. In my view, this is an important effect that is often ignored in the search for concrete meaning or clearly articulated epiphanies. Instead, we can recognize significance in the character's active use and communication of myth in relation to themselves and others.

As a concluding remark, it can be interesting to turn our attention from the myths within Carver's early short stories, to those which surround him as an author. Many critics allude to Carver's working-class origins in Yakima, Washington. The son of a sawmill-worker, he very much had a working-class upbringing. Carver's success as a writer undeniably drove him far away from the economic and social circumstances that marked his early life. Still, many associate Carver with his working-class beginnings, especially in relation to his father. In writings on, as well as within, Carver's body of work, Raymond sr. is

sometimes presented as a kind of mythical embodiment of the rural depression-era working class (Harker 2007, 716). Carver himself participated in the construction of the working-class mythos that came to surround him. Ben Harker notes how Carver often referred to his proletarian provenance in interviews, where "he consistently pushed his background into the foreground and, in so doing, played an important role in shaping and reinforcing the reading public's perception of him as a chronicler of blue-collar despair" (2007, 715). One could argue that the myths we construct around Carver as an author become an important aspect of his working-class representation. The portrayal and fixation on his blue-collar origins underline and echo the proletarian existence of his characters. Although based in truth, the popular narrative on Carver often focuses on a conception of the working-class that is white, male, and engaged with manual labor. This is despite us knowing that the subjects of the proletariat are not so monolithic.

Although a kind of masculine archetype of the working-class often stand as the main character of Carver's early short stories, the landscape of his fictitious America is never idealized or oversimplified. If we look to the contents of his stories, we find that he actively fragments and challenges monolithic conceptions of the working-class. As seen in the examples of myth and storytelling presented above, his characters might face some common obstacles, but ultimately navigate diverse and differing challenges at the helm of their everyday lives. In true Wittgensteinan fashion, Carver's work seems to move away from any quest for extraordinary events or grand truths. His characters remain dedicated to the significance of the ordinary, and the weight and meaning in the stories they tell can be found chiefly in their use. Firmly situated within the complicated fabric of daily life lies the complexity of Carver's working-class mythologies.

Conclusion

In a 1984 interview, Carver told Patricia Morrisroe that life during his struggles with alcoholism was a "wasteland" and that there were "certain things" in his past he simply did not want to remember (68). Morrisroe alludes to Carver's reflections on this time as a state of hopelessness from which one wants to detach or escape, in her synopsis of his work:

> Much has been written about the bleakness of Carver's vision of America. His stories are populated by ordinary people – waitresses, hairdressers, factory workers – who can't cope with daily life. Instead of seeking solace in friends or family, they turn to alcohol or television. They have dreams, but they don't have the words or imagination to express them. (1990, 69)

The aim of my thesis has been to question this focus on "bleakness" within the critical discourse on Carver's early work. I disagree that his characters cannot cope with daily life. On the contrary, I have argued that the realm of the everyday remains a key arena within which his subjects act, live, and speak in meaningful ways. This is not to say that their existence is without burdens. The frustration of navigating a reality that at times unfolds like a wasteland is very much present in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* However, there is so much more we can discern from these pages, if we recognize the significance of the everyday for the characters. In so doing, we can acknowledge that the existence of Carver's working subjects is far from barren. His characters do seek solace in friends and family, they do have dreams, and they do have an expressive language and a profound ability to reflect on their experiences. It appears to me this is often ignored because the modes of expression employed by these characters have roots in working-class culture, instead of elitist aesthetic spheres. I suggest an approach to Carver's early work that appreciates the efforts to render contemporary working-class life in a realistic manner. This entails a recognition of the ability of his characters to act and move within an otherwise restrictive system.

Of course, when we speak of a realistic literary portrayal of the working class, we must recognize the limitations of Carver's work. He represents not a compound rendering of modern American workers, but a fragment of a much larger mosaic. As critics have noted, his writing leaves out experiences connected to race, sexual orientation, and to a degree, gender. Considering the diversity of the real working class, it is improbable for any literary rendering to fully capture its vast complexities. Furthermore, an approach to the working class as a clearly defined, comprehensible concept is not necessarily beneficial. Rancière argues for an

approach to the proletariat that recognizes it as an assemblage of diverse voices, instead of a monolithic group. He writes that "there is no single 'voice of the people'. There are broken, polemical, voices, each time dividing the identity they present" (2011, 12). Rancière's argument is key in the sense that it recognizes the specificity of all subjects that make up the working class. If we conflate workers into a homogenous expression of the same issues and concerns, we quickly reduce and generalize a complicated reality. I think this is true even for Carver's literary portrayal of a portion of the American working class. Even within his limited aestheticization of proletarian lives, there is nuance, gradation, and complexities.

One might question how *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* can serve as a form of working-class representation at all. This connects to discourses on whether art can spring into political realms in meaningful ways. Because Carver's proletariat is fictional, we naturally separate his portrayal from that offered by historical accounts. However, Barthes argues that historians and authors alike can only address the real through the "reality effect" (1989, 141). A given object is never fully captured by the written word as language can only denote the real through an artificial recreation of concrete manifestations (Barthes 1989, 148). In line with this sentiment, Rancière stresses the narrativity of history and literature alike, where both aim to convey a story (Davis 2010, 63). History and realist fiction subscribe to a reconstruction of reality that is circumscribed by context and purpose. This connection is not an argument for the total conflation of historiography and literature as disciplines. Instead, I believe it highlights how all writing ultimately stands as a subjective social construction, rather than an objective or ultimate truth. This facilitates an approach to literature which does not deflect its significance simply because it is fiction. What literature can offer as a form of representation is a cultural visibility to the subjects it includes.

For the American working class, the type of cultural representation literature can offer is important. Because their concerns are so often ignored, modes of art directed at their interests call our attention to a group that is systemically neglected. Carver himself was always adamant about not taking a political stance (Sexton 1990, 131). However, he saw the validity of writing about "the dispossessed, the submerged population" (Sexton 1990, 130). This suggests that the political weight of Carver's working-class representation lies not within overt allusions to class struggle or revolution, but in the art of representation itself; Carver's literary portrayal of the everyday of workers implies that it constitutes a valid and significant subject of art, discussion, and consideration. Of course, I believe it is necessary to recognize that although a short-story collection on working-class characters can shed light on the concerns of the subjects it addresses, it is not a supplement for the lack of political and

systemic platforms of which the American proletariat remains deprived. Herein lies an important discussion on art and politics. I believe these are spheres that can overlap in significant ways, but it is still necessary to address how they are not completely interchangeable.

The most important reflection lies not within the span or nobility of Carver's literary rendering of the working class. Nor in whether his characters are good or bad. Instead, I would direct attention to the ways we as critics choose to structure discourses on working subjects. Carver's first short story collection is, of course, open to interpretation. The deciding factor lies in the ways scholars choose to focus their readings. In my view, critics can lack caution in the manner they frame and articulate reflections on Carver's fictious proletariat. I suggest we need to lend his working subjects the nuance necessary to acknowledge their navigations within the complexity of modern everyday life. In so doing, we are better equipped to participate in respectful discussions. In this regard, I advocate an approach to *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, and working-class discourse in general, that heeds the title of Carver's first short story collection. When we speak of the proletariat, fictional or not, we as critics can afford to be a bit more quiet, please. This means not to remain silent, but to search for a balance between speaking up for and listening to the subjects we discuss. If we aim to hear the voices of workers, we can also learn.

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