‘Things he wanted to say’

Figures in the Dialogue of Raymond Carver’s Short Fiction

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Master’s Thesis
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Spring 2016

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Published at the University of Bergen, Norway

Abstract in Norwegian

Samandrag

Raymond Carver (1938–1988) bringa noko nytt til torgs i 1900-talslitteraturen i USA då historiene hans byrja å dukke opp i litteraturtidsskrift frå 1960-åra og utover, og fleire har meint at han var med på å gje den utdøyande amerikanske novellesjangeren nytt liv. Samtidig har han fått ord på seg både for å utvide modernismen og å ha skapt ein slags ny type realisme. Uansett korleis ein vel å kategorisere han, har dialogen ein svært viktig posisjon i novellene hans.

Føremålet med denne masteroppgåva er å utforske og skildre kva rolle dialogen spelar i novellene til Carver, og meir spesifikt korleis dialogen bidreg til å opplyse og skildre kjærleiksforhold. Forholda i Carver-novellene spenner over alt frå romantiske samband som tilsynelatande fungerer godt, til intrigar som balanserer på kanten mot det katastrofale. Oppgåva vil bruke *språklege figurar* som rammeverk og sjå dialogen som eit resultat av desse. Slike figurar utgjer mønster som ein kan finne att i dialogen i historiene, og dei er med på å skape den forståinga vi får av dialogen og novella som heilskap.

Ved å undersøkje tre sentrale figurar i forfattarskapen til Carver og sjå nærare på korleis dei formar og determinerer dialog, søkjer oppgåva å vise den mangelen på valmoglegheiter dei fleste av personane i novellene står overfor, og sjå på korleis denne håpløysa kjem fram i dialogen deira. Oppgåva vil også vise korleis éi av novellene bryt ut av mønsteret sitt og går inn i ein ny figur.

Figurane som blir tekne opp, er omgåing (*circumvention*), i novellene «Careful» og «A Serious Talk», stille (*silence*), i «Preservation» og «The Pheasant», og uro/angst (*anxiety*), i «After the Denim» og «A Small, Good Thing».

Acknowledgements

Embarking on a project like this has truly been like going on a journey of which the end station is not known when you leave – with all the upsides and all the downsides. I will not deny that at many times I have been struck by the same inarticulateness and apathy that Carver's characters have to go through, and more than once, I have felt that I 'didn't have any words left in [me]'.

Developing the ideas behind this project and turning them into writing has been a lengthy process. The two persons that primarily deserve my thanks for their perseverance with me in this are my supervisors, Associate Professor Øyunn Hestetun and Professor Lene M. Johannessen. Øyunn assisted me in a brilliant manner in the first phase of the project, whereas Lene has been invaluable in guiding me on the long way towards and past the finishing line. It is more than just a phrase when I say that the thesis would not have been the same without you!

At the end of the Master's Programme in Foreign Language Teacher Education, which feels like it started yesterday, I would also like to thank Åsmund Aase Fluge, Håkon Osmundsen and Jon Martin Westereng for being inestimable friends and great partners for academic discussions and co-operation.

Thanks are also due to all my fellow students from the reading hall, for interesting quizzes and non-academic discussions during lunch breaks, and not least to my parents, whose encouragements have never been far away when this thesis has seemed like an intangible and hopeless project.

Finally, a special recognition goes to a person at the Department of Foreign Languages whose academic excellence I have been admiring since the day we met, and who is always there for a chat or some advice. You know who you are!

Thank you, all of you!
Eirik Ulltang Birkeland

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Introduction

Characterised as a 'rejuvenator of the once-dying American short story' (Nesset, blurb), Raymond Carver (1938–1988) represented something novel in the 20th century literature of the USA when his stories started to appear in literary magazines the 1960s. At the same time, he has been said to extend the Modernist tradition and to present a type of Realism. From such diverse characteristics, one might deduce that his authorship can be inquired from multiple points of departure, but dialogue is the one that has been chosen for this thesis.

Raymond Carver's poems and short stories were published from the early 1960s to the end of the 1980s and relate tales of the middle class through explorations of such themes as loneliness, infidelity, delusion and grief. The aesthetics of Raymond Carver's short stories is characterised by surface descriptions and spare use of words. On this note, it is almost as if what is not told can be more telling of the characters and their situation than what *is* told, because the tension is built up below the surface, in the space between what is said and what can only be inferred.

Through letting his narrators and characters operate on a very plainspoken level, Carver has an exceptional ability to describe the downfalls of his characters with subtlety and irony. 'Prose is architecture', he said, paraphrasing Hemingway and Flaubert, 'And this isn't the baroque age' (Grimal and del Pozzo). Despite Carver's seemingly technical view of his handicraft, his stories do not seem like artificial constructs, but rather as stories that offer glimpses into real life. Often concerned with the tough and seemingly empty lives of blue-collar workers, Carver has been named the 'Connoisseur of the Commonplace' (Saltzman 1). Still, he avoids becoming a direct spokesperson for this social group, and he leaves his readers to decide whether the characters are victims or villains.

Colloquial and conversational dialogue is typically an important part of what drives Carver's stories forward, but just as often, the lack of successful dialogue represents an obstacle for development in the situations of his characters and in how they relate to each other. Inarticulateness, the inability to talk about 'the elephant in the room', often serves as the symptom of a hidden conflict in Carver's short stories and as a revelatory feature of the relationships of his characters. Frequently, the stories end with a set of emotionally pent-up figures who just seem to continue living their highly 'ordinary' lives. Thus, conversation and communication is not only a tool for Carver's short stories to function through, but also a theme in itself.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore and describe the role of dialogue in a selection of Carver's short stories, and more specifically how the dialogue serves to describe relationships ranging from seemingly well-functioning affiliations to bonds on the brink of catastrophe. This will be done through viewing dialogue as constituted by figures. These are patterns that can be found in blocks of dialogue, and they contribute to our understanding of the entirety of the dialogue and story in question. By examining three central figures in Carver's authorship and looking at how they form and determine dialogue, the thesis will demonstrate the lack of options of most of the characters in the short stories in question and look at how this hopelessness is represented in their dialogue. The framework of figures will be further elaborated below, and we will see that it suits Carver's short stories because these are indeed characterised by patterns and recurring topics of interest.

Some Aspects of Carver's Dialogue

In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory in 1984, Carver said the following:

> I pay a lot of attention to trying to make the people talk the right way. By this I don't mean just *what* they say, but *how* they say it, and *why*. […] Everything is said for a reason and adds, I want to think, to the overall impression of the story. (Gentry and Stull 113)

These words were part of an answer to a question from McCaffery about whether there not were 'formal problems in writing about this group of people' (112), i.e. blue-collar workers, and specifically in writing their dialogue. This reflects a common notion among earlier critics who questioned how apt it was that such inarticulate and dishevelled characters should take the centre stage of literature. Bronwen Thomas describes how eloquence and 'the art of conversation' became an ideal from the seventeenth century onwards (36), where the magniloquent dialogue of the educated upper class lent its style to literature and vice versa. Consequently, many writers who have departed from so-called eloquent writing styles have been criticised for it. Even though various Modernist projects attempted a firm break with established expectations of form and subject, readers have continued to look for the elements that they are the most accustomed to. Thus, Carver's dramatization of routine and the seemingly banal and tedious discourse of daily life was something unexpected. In a related discussion, Thomas states, without referring specifically to Carver, that what might *sound* monotonous to the reader 'can also be employed to expose petty displays of power and covert displays of control, or simply to dramatize the tedium and frustrations of the characters' lives' (28).

Raymond Carver's short stories, and specifically their dialogues, take as their points of departure these quotidian tensions. This inclination towards 'ordinary people' in everyday situations – whatever that may mean – is probably also what has led the term Realism to surface

again in relation to Carver's works. His ability to combine verisimilitude and identification with artistic accuracy might be part of the explanation behind the stories' popularity among the public and literary scholars alike. This is not to say that the quality or popularity of literature correlates with the readers' recognition of it, but the creation of identifiable and contemporary milieus has been identified as one of Carver's characteristics. If we take this one step further, there is no doubt that the shape of dialogue is a specific feature that 'plays a crucial role in helping to create and populate credible fictional worlds', as Thomas notes in a general discussion of dialogue (15).

The successfulness of dialogue in fictional works is often measured mainly by how natural it sounds (15), or in other words how well it succeeds in emulating real speech. Not only is this a reductive approach to analysis and criticism; it is also probable, according to Norman Page, that it is 'based on an inadequate or inaccurate notion of what spontaneous speech is really like' (4). Carver also acknowledges this in the said interview, saying that real speech would make the readers 'snore away', and that 'I don't think you'll find people [in my stories] talking the way people do in real life' (Gentry and Stull 113). By equating the dialogue of fiction with real life conversations, we forget the spontaneity of everyday speech. Unlike the latter, Thomas notes with reference to Lennard J. Davis, *fictional* dialogue is essentially 'non-negotiable [...] and subject to the absolute control of the novelist' (39). To the reader, it may seem as if everything is possible for the characters, whereas in reality, they are strictly controlled by the author and his intentions to take the storyline in a certain direction. As an examination of closeness to real speech is not very rewarding, and as it contributes to simplifying rather than enlightening the complexities of Raymond Carver's short stories, this aspect is outside the interest of this thesis.

Rather than looking at the verisimilitude of Carver's dialogue, an interesting take from an attitudinal and authorial point of view would be to explore how and where it fits into the

surrounding literary landscape. Whereas Modernism and Postmodernism, as observed by Thomas, 'are perceived to distance themselves from the popular or the everyday' (9), it seems safe to say that Carver's short stories represent a return to these spheres. Still, it may be too easy to dismiss them as direct and contrasting reactions to the earlier and more self-conscious literature. Stephen Dobyns says of Carver that 'he had no interest in the various Isms and theories' (Runyon xiii), but Ayala Amir still points out that some of the Modernists were important influences for Carver (xv), and it is natural that such previous and contemporary literary tendencies impacted his writing. It is thus more than tempting to read a heritage from the Modernist view of language inadequacy into the hesitant and awkward nature of Carver's dialogues. Lingering in the background is the idea that the complexity of certain concepts makes their rendering into language difficult or impossible, either because they touch into something too deeply human or for reasons that are grounded in developments in society at large. Alternatively, critics have suggested that the primary problem is that Carver's characters, with Kirk Nesset's words, 'lack both the capacity and impetus necessary for the task of "wondering why"' (3). A tempting conclusion would be that these alternatives are just different sides of the same coin.

Indubitably, the author takes a great chance when choosing this type of hesitating dialogue for his stories, namely the chance that they get dull and unengaging because the progress seems to be minimal or non-existent. It takes a certain talent to avoid this and instead achieve what Robert Houston in a review calls a 'universe-in-a-grain-of-sand vision' (23). Later in the same review, he states that 'Carver is a hunter of souls, and is wise enough to know that souls are never dull' (24). Consequently, there is not only a banal side to Carver's stories, but also a deeper side that depends more on the participation of the reader. As Thomas notes, analysis of dialogue might 'invite us to speculate as to what [the characters] might be thinking or feeling' (47).

Further, there is the notion that readers are apt to fill in 'the "space or vacuum" [that the characters] occupy' (67), so that if the text in question does not give us 'the full picture', we are almost forced into forming our own theories and ideas about what has happened or is happening. Thus, we see that the level of interaction with the reader is likely to be heightened in stories with hidden details compared to stories where everything is laid out in its entirety. Amir puts it well when she writes that 'the blockage of one channel of contact opens up another' (xix). The same effect is achieved by Carver's tendency of not concluding his short stories in a traditional manner, but instead letting them more or less 'fade out'. Once again, there is a clear invitation for the reader to participate in shaping the final impression and the implicit continuation of the story.

As mentioned before, there are several layers to Raymond Carver's stories, and just like Vivian Mercier's famous description of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, that 'nothing happens, twice' (Mercier 6) is too simplistic, the same goes for similar descriptions of the plots of Carver's short stories. While 'nothing happens' could be a tempting summary for many of the stories, it presupposes that the action is merely to be found in what is evident for everybody to see. Thomas describes how this is often what we expect, namely that the plot contains various elements that, when linked together, lead towards some kind of goal or climax. These elements are also part of what creates the expectations of the reader (75). In more recent literature, however, dialogue in itself has more and more entered the stage as a plot element and not only as a tool, sometimes even as the only plot element. Thus, it becomes necessary to operate with revised definitions of plot and action that also take into account what happens between the characters when they are speaking to each other, in addition to the details of their conversations that can only be inferred or guessed. This gives an extensive potential for creating tensions, so that indeed, 'dialogue may play a vital role in ensuring the forward momentum and cohesion of

plot' (75). At other times, the author may instead wish to produce the exact opposite of forward momentum. Thomas points to the 'idea of using dialogue to deliberately slow down the action or to foreground the seemingly banal and inconsequential' (87). Through the analyses that will follow, it becomes clear that Carver employs dialogue both to drive the action of his stories forward and to slow the action down, sometimes even at the same time.

The observations above will serve as a backdrop when we enter the specific analyses. Thomas's work on dialogue does not discuss Carver specifically, but as we have seen, she presents a number of perspectives on fictional dialogue that are important to have in mind when creating the framework for reading dialogues. The paragraphs above are thus meant as a way to write the reader into the right frame of mind before he or she reads the more specific analyses.

Perspectives on Figuration and its Relation to Form and Content

Our understanding of language and communication requires and depends upon linguistic structures, and these may be organised in various frameworks or models. The same goes for dialogue, and one rhetorical framework for analysis of such discourse is to view it as constituted by *figures*. According to Gérard Genette, these have been defined as '*ways of speaking removed from those that are natural and ordinary*' (48). On the other hand, he also says that 'nothing is more common and ordinary than the use of figures' (48). This duality corresponds remarkably well with Carver's short stories, because they have a certain way of being peculiar in the sense that they activate one's curiosity at the same time as they seem very ordinary and quotidian. The creation of such figures, Genette says, takes place 'between the letter and the meaning, between what the poet has *written* and what he *thought*' (47). In other words, there is an implicit communication between the author and his work and not the least the reader and the work. The figure comes into being when it is recognised in the process that happens when a piece of writing goes from

being printed letters to becoming meaning in the mind of a reader. For this recognition to happen, the reader must be dealing with known and recurring forms, but simultaneously, these forms must stand out and be recognisable as figures.

The stories that will be brought up in this thesis all deal with relationships in different phases and with different challenges, a factor which naturally influences the dialogue that occurs in them. Roland Barthes treats a number of different love-related figures in his work *A Lover's Discourse*. It is through borrowing and inspiration from this literary monograph that the figures that will be brought up in this thesis have been established. Barthes has not been consulted for any of his other literary theories, but rather for his specific take on figures. The three figures that have been borrowed from Barthes or created for this thesis are *circumvention*, *silence* and *anxiety*. In this, there is no pretence to give an exhaustive presentation of the figures of Raymond Carver's authorship, and even though this thesis discusses one figure at a time, there might be several, partly overlapping figures at play simultaneously.

Regarding the perception of *figures*, Barthes says that '[a] figure is established if at least someone can say: "*That's so true! I recognize that scene of language.*"' (4). Again, recognition is of the essence for the feature of a figure to be successful. A characteristic of figuration, Barthes notes, is that the speaking party in the relationship 'struggles in a kind of lunatic sport, he spends himself, like an athlete; he "phrases," like an orator; he is caught, stuffed into a role, like a statue' (4). This exhausting manner of expression will be evident as we go into the analysis of Carver's short stories, not necessarily through excessive rhetoric, but just as well through extreme feebleness and will that cannot be transformed into action. Thus, we must think of the discreet, yet powerful explosions of Carver's works when Barthes writes that '[e]ach figure explodes, vibrates in and of itself like a sound severed from any tune—or is repeated to satiety, like the

motif of a hovering music' (6). This intensity does not have to be loud and clear, because as Genette asserts, '[a]bsolute sobriety of expression is the mark of an extreme elevation in thought' (47).

Because the figures in question are constituted through the sum – or at least through longer passages – of how the couples communicate, a prerequisite for the reader to recognise them is that he is equipped with communication of some length. Thus, more than one utterance is needed for the reader to discover them, which means that no single element can be isolated as a certain figure in itself. This implies that single utterances are not intrinsically part of any specific figure. While dialogue is needed to determine which figures are put to use, the figures that are discovered will also determine the dialogue of the stories, in the sense that they are governing the storylines and how the stories are perceived. In other words, figures are important for bringing up specific feelings and thoughts in the reader, and for achieving a unified effect. What we are witnessing is thus a co-constitutiveness between form and content. This interplay between character/dialogue and the figure is what creates the final product, namely the story. The implications of this dialectics for this thesis specifically is that it will be important to look closely at the mentioned relationships and the characters that constitute them, because the same figure might have different effects on different characters. Such a dialectics also makes it relevant to discuss whether these characters are determined to the fate they are given in the stories instead of having a free will to break out of their situations – insofar as one could speak of 'free will' in relation to a literary work.

Previous Carver Studies and the Scope of This Thesis

The literary criticism on Raymond Carver's short stories is relatively comprehensive. It consists of a substantial number of journal articles, but also dedicated critical volumes by scholars such as Arthur M. Saltzman (1988), Ewing Campbell (1992), Randolph Runyon (1992), Adam Meyer (1995), Kirk Nesset (1995), Arthur F. Bethea (2001), G. P. Lainsbury (2004), Sandra Lee Kleppe and Robert Miltner (eds., 2008), Ayala Amir (2010) and James Plath (ed., 2013). The first wave of these, from Saltzman to Nesset, sought to characterise each of his short story collections separately, whereas the latter works have implemented a more thematic approach, being either monographs or critical anthologies. Many of the mentioned works pinpoint communication and dialogue as critical aspects of what constitutes Carver's works and his unique voice, but the author of this thesis has yet to find any studies that delve thoroughly into the different figures and forms that dialogue (or the lack of it) takes, and that analyse the stories through such a lens. The take of this thesis will thus be to show that several different, but related figures can be employed to give a greater understanding of how the dialogue of the stories function as a whole. What this gives us is a level of abstraction that will 'lift' the dialogue from the single words on the page and assign these words a meaning as part of the entirety of the story. Exploring and elaborating on the topic of dialogue through detailed textual analysis will thus be the method of this thesis. This will lead into a discussion of how the different figures and dialogues shape and control the characters and their relationships. The aim is to demonstrate that these elements work together in such a way that the characters are left with no options or alternative futures, with the exception of one important change that happens in the last of the stories that will be analysed.

Chapter one will examine the figure of *circumvention*, or the type of dialogue where the characters are beating about the bush, to use an idiom. When the subject of speech is delicate, the

result is often a failure to communicate about what is most important. Through analysing the short stories 'Careful' and 'A Serious Talk', we will see how the characters constantly circumvent the obvious topic of conversation and turn to trivialities, and how this determines their dialogues and relationships. These two short stories were chosen because they so clearly present us with circumvention and obfuscation, not only through the characters' dialogue, but also through physical effects, like a clogged ear and vandalism – elements that represent obstruction or destruction rather than construction.

Chapter two will take a closer look at the lack of dialogue. The figure of *silence* is a feature that regularly haunts Carver's characters, and often it seems to be covering or hiding something that can only be inferred. This figure is a prominent part of the short stories 'Preservation' and 'The Pheasant', and it will show us that 'less is invariably more' (Clarke 103). The analyses will ask what the implications of silence are, how it influences the characters and what they might be trying to cover or hide. These two stories are particularly imbued with silence and the awkwardness that comes with it. The figure comes through in settings where there is little or no hope, and this reinforces the fact that there is nothing for the characters to talk about. Additionally, the figure reveals how the foundations of the characters' relationships are crumbling.

Chapter three will consider the dialogue that comes with the figure of *anxiety* and being situated on the threshold between life and death. Such situations tend to create distance between the characters, and the result is often inarticulateness or lack of honesty. Two short stories that expose their characters to such ordeals are 'After the Denim' and 'A Small, Good Thing'. The close readings will look into how crisis forms the dialogue of such situations and how the outcomes for the characters are quite different in these two stories. Among the many works of

Carver they manage particularly well to push anxiety to the extreme in their dealing with fateful moments of life. Their characters are stunned by their situations, and the two stories were especially chosen because of their different takes on handling the terrible consequences of crisis.

The conclusion of the thesis will draw together these figures and their implications for the dialogue. It will look more into the general features of Carver's dialogues, before moving on to the more specific inarticulateness that the characters are experiencing. Further, it will explore the outcomes of using figures as a framework for reading. This inquiry will be used as a premise for the final discussion of whether the characters are determined or not. The thesis will argue that reading the above-mentioned stories through figures bring out a kind of determinism that resides in language and limits the free will of the characters, but the thesis also brings the realisation that one of the short stories break out of its confined pattern and into a new figure.

Chapter 1:
'We have things to talk about': Dialogue of Circumvention

> […] the volume and apparent frankness of the characters' talk may be no more than a mask, a device whereby, under the guise of conversing and communicating with one another, they continually dance around the surface of their relationships (Thomas 68)

Dialogue is often considerably vague, whether in real life or in literature. Important topics are often obfuscated in favour of something less controversial or more concrete, tangible or quotidian. Speaking one's mind can be both difficult and uncomfortable. This does not necessarily obstruct dialogue from happening at all, but as Bronwen Thomas notes, the function of dialogue in such situations may only be a mask or a guise. Throughout history, masks have mainly been used as a way of hiding one's identity.[1] This concealment of the self was emphasised by Carl Jung with his notion of *persona*, 'a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual' (192). Such a concealment does not only imply that a face is hidden, but also that another is presented. A mask is furthermore often constituted in relation to a set of established expectations. The purpose behind fulfilling such expectations may be that a person wants to abide by social norms, with the mask functioning as a filter to be able to achieve this. If so, the mask may also function as an effective hindrance for honesty.

In his short stories, Raymond Carver often lets his characters wear masks that seem inescapable. Typically, one will find that the characters struggle with describing their feelings or

[1] Another important way of using masks has been to frighten enemies, but this is not relevant for our purposes.

the challenges of their relationships and turn to chatting or distractions instead of untangling their personal problems. Thus, their discourse constructs a mask that limits one or both parties in a relationship and changes their personality to a less authentic one. With inspiration from Roland Barthes, the figure of *circumvention* has been created for the purpose of this thesis and the following analyses, and it is defined thus:

> The amorous subject deliberately or unknowingly circumvents the uncomfortableness in his or her relationship and instead turns to superficial topics of conversation.

With this figure in mind, we will examine how the dialogue of circumvention is constructed – both as a narrative feature and as a theme in itself – and how masks seem to determine the dialogue and its consequences for the relationships in question.

1.1 'I can't hear you': Circumvention in 'Careful'

The short story 'Careful', which was first published in 1983, may be said to be a prime example to illustrate evasive communication. Adam Meyer names it 'a culmination of […] several Carver stories' because it brings up two of Carver's notorious themes: 'the problems of marital communication and the lure of alcoholism' (134). Indeed, it also serves as a suitable starting point for the analyses of this thesis because of its multi-layered approach to the challenges of communication. We will see how especially the motif of the ear connects to hearing what others say, both in a physiological and psychological sense.

The reader is introduced to what seems to be a veritable bachelor's flat, even though Lloyd, the main character, has only lived there for two weeks and is a married man – at least until further notice. He spends most of his time in the sofa, and a pervasive indifference is over him: 'He'd had doughnuts and champagne for breakfast'. 'So what?' is his own careless reaction (442). Further contributing to this, he is reported to have ignored his landlady lying motionless on the

carpet in her living room; 'the TV was going, so he chose to think she was asleep' (441). He finds himself in what Arthur M. Saltzman calls a 'womb-like limbo' (136) until a troublesome ear and a visit from his wife take him back to the rest of the world. Inez, his wife, has come because they 'have things to talk about' (Carver 444). Showing up in a new outfit and with a new handbag, their separation seems to have renewed her vitality, a sharp contrast to Lloyd's situation.

The short story is opened with the simple, yet crucial statement that Lloyd moved out after 'a lot of talking—what his wife, Inez, called *assessment*' (441). This presents us with an interesting distinction between the two characters' views of communication. To *assess* something is to estimate and evaluate its quality and value. In such a context, value is often used in a materialistic sense, for instance when assessing taxes or the value of a property. In other words, it sounds like Inez has conducted a systematic evaluation of how suitable Lloyd is for a continued marriage, and reached the conclusion that he is not. On the one hand, this sounds like a very rational approach to sort out one's life, but on the other hand, Inez might be trying to develop an objective rationale for something that in reality is quite subjective. It is questionable whether one of the parties in a relationship could assess this relationship in a neutral way. Further to this, an assessment often implies that the object or person to be evaluated is measured against something; however, we do not get to know what Inez's basis for comparison is.

If we regard all of this in relation to the figure of circumvention, the word *assessment* sounds like a euphemism to avoid the more direct statement that Inez decided that Lloyd had to move out. Thus, we get the impression that she tries to be gentle on Lloyd to take the edge off the implications of what she is saying. This makes her seem like she is controlled by an urge to circumvent the truth. All of this seems to have gone over Lloyd's head, because he only heard 'a lot of talking'. As this phrase signals an indifferent attitude to what is being spoken of, we get a

clear indication of the communication climate in their relationship already from the first sentence. If 'assessment' represents quality, 'a lot of talking' instead stands for quantity. A reasonable interpretation is that Lloyd heard words without meaning. The choice of phrase signals something in the direction of noise, nagging or incomprehension. If so, the act of not listening to one's partner is established already here, and this sets the scene for the rather ludicrous confrontation – or maybe the lack of confrontation – that is about to unfold.

As Inez enters, there is no angry tone between the two. They rather speak colloquially and frankly to each other, perhaps with a few hints from Inez that Lloyd should pull himself together: 'It's eleven o'clock' (443), she says, and he is still in his pyjamas. The question is if this discourse is merely a construct determined by the characters' masks or guises, like Thomas describes (68), so that there is a boundary and distinction between their inner selves and the versions that they present to each other. Instead of being themselves, they enter a performance, as in a theatre, and simultaneously they are guided by the expectations and boundaries that come as part of this performance. Like all social boundaries, this will have consequences for what they can say and which topics are 'allowed' and not. After a few opening phrases, Lloyd brings up his here-and-now problem: 'my ear's plugged up' (443), which means that he can barely hear her. Thus begins the circumvention of what Inez reportedly came for, and their masked selves are more busy with the ear than with their situation at large. Hence, the dialogue between them that follows is also very subject-specific and focused on the clogged up ear, so that the ear functions as an excuse to keep their masks on and continue the figure of circumvention.

Up until now, 'masks' have been used in plural, implying that both Lloyd and Inez are 'wearing' one, but this could be debated: The visit is an initiative from Inez's side, and in one way, it seems like she was after an honest and outright conversation with Lloyd. He is the one

who creates the scene with the ear and consequently also the one to blame for the distraction. Therefore, it is timely to ask if it would be more correct to view Lloyd as the only masked one of the two. On the other hand, however, there is no clear resistance to be noted from Inez when Lloyd starts going on about his ear. It is of course a practical problem if Lloyd cannot hear what she is trying to say, but instead of using her time on the ear, she could have insisted that they address their real concerns. Here she seems idler than the Inez whose 'assessment' ruled that Lloyd should move out. Saltzman points out that 'Inez's attentions are of necessity more maternal than wifely' (137). With statements like 'It'll be all right. I'll be careful' (445), she seems like she is playing the role of the mother who is consoling her child before he is going through something that might hurt. Therefore, it is reasonable to maintain the impression that Inez too has put on the mask of circumvention. Viewed from the outside, there was a possibility initially for them to enter into an honest and outright conversation, but their circumstances and the direction that their dialogue takes is making this an impossibility.

The masks created by the figure of circumvention have a firm grip when it comes to managing the direction of the dialogue, but there are also moments in the couple's conversation that let us feel that their masks are slipping, often through statements that make us wonder whether they have more insight into their situation than we first thought. Thus, double meanings and double layers are abundant in this short story – for instance when Inez says 'I guess we'll have to take things one at a time' (444). It is as if she knew that something irrelevant (i.e. the ear) had to come up when she visited Lloyd, but at the same time, it is as if her mask is slipping and she is referring to their relationship for a brief moment. This is followed by the comment that they need to do this ('take things one at a time') so that 'we can have some light on the situation' (444). She seems to go for the systematic approach when it comes to their problem, thus starting

with Lloyd's ear. By doing so, however, the brief window of self-examination closes. None of them sees any alternatives to attacking the problem with the ear, and that is what they do. This implies either a lack of will or a lack of perspective. Either way, the result is that there is no alternative way out of their situation, and they are therefore trapped in it. Thus, what could have been a break with the pattern that is constructed by the figure of circumvention is just reinforcing it instead.

There are also several instances where Lloyd's mask could be said to slip through his comments. The consequence of his ear problem is of course that he cannot hear his wife properly, and it is suggested that this is a repetitive problem; Lloyd himself asks: 'You remember that other time it happened?' (443). If we read this as a mask slip, it seems to be a repetitive challenge in their relationship that he does not hear her out or listen properly to her. This question could also be seen as a reference to how Lloyd is still living his life in the past, and how he does not seem to be able to move on without Inez. Another interesting bit of 'mask-slipping' dialogue appears a bit later:

> "Well, your nurse was never faced with this exact problem," Inez said. "Anyway, we need to try *something*. We'll try this first. If it doesn't work, we'll try something else. That's life, isn't it?"
>
> "Does that have a hidden meaning or something?" Lloyd said. (445)

Lloyd's question here stands clearly out, and it almost seems out of character for him to actually bring up and refer back to what she just has said, thus underlining why it may be seen as a slip of his mask. The 'hidden meaning' might of course be the possibility to read Inez's words as pertaining to their relationship in general rather than the specific clogged ear she is dealing with. A similar comment is presented to us when Inez refers to what the landlady said when she (Inez)

went to borrow her baby oil: 'She said it [i.e. clogging of the ear] used to happen to her husband' (448). Once again, 'it' might relate to not listening properly to one's partner, suggesting that this is a common challenge in relationships. Yet, these brief, epiphany-like moments fade away before anybody realises they were there, not least the characters themselves, and they are dominated and over-run by the figure of circumvention that characterises the rest of the dialogue.

We see that the story is bursting with references to verbs such as 'listen' and 'hear', as if wishing to lead the readers' thoughts into the couple's communication and lack of it. This feature of the short story could easily have been excessive, but is rather quite elegant: 'I didn't think you heard me', Inez says to Lloyd, and a few moments later, she 'acted as if she hadn't heard him' (443). Then she remarks that 'I can't hear you either. Maybe this is catching' (445). All of these misunderstandings about who heard, did not hear and did not want to hear what are also starkly contrasted with how we understand the couple used to communicate: 'There'd been a time, long ago when they used to feel they had ESP when it came to what the other one was thinking. They could finish sentences that the other had started' (445). This longing back to better days contributes to the underlining of how far away they have moved from each other, and it follows the comment that 'it was as if [Inez were speaking] from another room' (445).

There is still a certain closeness between the two characters, but Lloyd's psychological resignation finds its physical equivalent when the narrator makes the point that he sits so close to Inez that he could have touched her. He does not do it, however. At one level, he wants to reach out to her, both literally and figuratively, but their connection is broken. Thus, when he says that '[m]y ear's plugged up' (443), this is both a physical manifestation and a circumvention of their larger issue. As mentioned above, the distinction between his hearing 'a lot of talking' and Inez's conducting an '*assessment*' (441) is a clear example of the underlying issue. Instead of taking in

impulses from Inez, he has made himself a grotto where he and his mask are 'talking inside a barrel' and where he hears Inez as if she were talking 'through a lead pipe' (444), or what Meyer calls an 'echo chamber' (134). As mentioned, Saltzman calls this a 'womb-like limbo' (136), and if we continue this imagery, it is impossible for him to cut the umbilical cord that connects him to the mother-like Inez.

Lloyd's material conditions also create a physical pressure on him: The apartment he is living in is described as very cramped. He has to duck when he walks around, be careful when he gets in and out of bed and bend over to get things out of the refrigerator (441). Furthermore, there is no phone to get in touch with the outer world. He has clearly isolated himself, his champagne and his doughnuts from the rest of society, but this constriction can also symbolise his narrow-mindedness and lack of understanding of Inez's views. His choice of champagne to quench his thirst comes through as quite ironic. With the connotation of being a party drink, the champagne here seems to be some kind of desperate consolation and a reminder of merrier and bygone times. The contrast between the party connotations of the champagne and Lloyd's pitiful surroundings underlines the dark and gloomy tone that is over him. He states multiple times things such as 'I feel like I want to cut my head off or something' (443). It is easy to read these instances as empty phrases and more extreme ways of saying that the plugged up ear is irritating him, but it is still striking that this is repeated (with variations) several times. In a sense, this implies the desperateness and immovability of Lloyd's character. Towards the end, he starts feeling 'afraid of the night that was coming' (449), paralleling his 'movement towards death or death-in-life', as Arthur F. Bethea notes (142). In the final sentences of the short story, hope and perdition seem to compete alongside each other: Lloyd 'peer[s] out the window', but he also notices 'the shadows that had entered the room' (451).

Behind Inez and Lloyd's meeting lies the assumption that having a proper talk about their relationship and its challenges would help them reach a truth or enlightenment of some kind. Their problem is however that they are constrained by their masks and constant distractions. There seems to be a will for successful dialogue, but it cannot be fulfilled: At one point, when Inez leaves the room, Lloyd starts pondering what to say to her, maybe wanting to articulate something substantial about their relation to each other, only to conclude that 'he couldn't say anything' (446). We see that in every such instance, the figure of circumvention is controlling him. Towards the end of the story, however, this *willingness* to communicate also fades away, making the revival of their relationship seem even more unlikely: 'He didn't listen. He didn't want to' (450). If we return to the idea of the mask, this idleness signifies the depressing and claustrophobic thought that he has no ability to free himself from this construct. Thus, we see that the masks function as a kind of straitjackets which enforce the figure of circumvention. The characters' actions are determined by the masks and not by themselves, and this turns the optimism that lies in the possibilities of conversation into a pessimistic hopelessness. As soon as the trivial problem of the ear is solved, Inez says that she has to leave because she is late for something. Thus, they never get around doing what she came for, and they are trapped in their roles as being neither a couple nor completely split up. When Inez says 'Goodbye' and closes the door behind her (450), this is not the real end for the two. They still have something to talk about, but given their locked-up situation, the figure of circumvention will once again materialise itself the next time they try.

1.2 'They did a little talking': Circumvention in 'A Serious Talk'

If the figure of circumvention manifested itself in the physical realm in 'Careful', the story 'A Serious Talk' (first published 1980) goes even further. We are introduced to Burt, yet another man who has had to move out, as he pulls into the driveway of the house where his wife, Vera, and their children live. The occasion is that he returns the day after Christmas, after having spent a part of Christmas Eve with them, and the story of this visit is told in retrospect. Burt's Christmas visit is only accepted with reluctance from Vera's side: She 'had warned him beforehand', and he 'had to be out by six o'clock' (291). Nevertheless, Burt seems determined to maintain the family life façade as he sits down with his family so that they can open his presents. Thus, we already note that he has put on a mask to comply with the norms of society and to seem like a normal husband and father, perhaps also to himself.

In some respects, Christmas and other similar holidays are very much about keeping up appearances. For some, they represent family life at its best, and for others they bring up the worst memories. For this family, Saltzman notes, 'the holiday has become an empty ceremony; there is nothing to celebrate' (114). Thus, everything that happens and is said will be an avoidance of this fact. For instance, Burt has brought a present for Vera, a cashmere sweater, and it is as if he passively, but desperately tries to repair what has been broken. Yet, they all know that Vera's 'friend and his children [are] coming for dinner' later that evening (Carver 291). The discrepancy between the idyll they are trying to construct and the reality behind it makes the figure of circumvention shine clearly through. At the same time it renders an honest dialogue impossible, not least because the children are there.

After the presents have been opened, Burt carries on the illusion of neatness: '[…] Burt liked it where he was. He liked it in front of the fireplace, a glass in his hand, his house, his home'

(291). While in this seemingly relaxing situation, he is watching Vera closely – and with tenderness – as if this was just a normal night at home. All of a sudden, his mood seems to shift, though. He fills the fireplace with too many sawdust logs, steals the pies Vera had made, 'one for every ten times she had ever betrayed him' (292), and runs off. Here, he lets his mask fall, presumably because there is too much unsaid between him and Vera, so that he is not capable of keeping up the appearance of Christmas joy anymore. Thus, we see that their lack of honest dialogue manifests itself through destructive actions.

The point where Burt takes off might seem like a break with the figure of circumvention because his actions speak a language so clear and definite that we might get the impression that he has had enough of Vera's dismissiveness. However, it may instead be read as just another instance of circumvention, only that the avoidance is achieved by actions instead of words. While his conduct might seem to represent the last nail in the coffin that is their relationship, he comes back for a 'second round' already the next day. Everyone can see that this is the beginning of total failure – except Burt, of course, and herein lies the lack of power of judgement that leaves him no other alternative future than what we see in the story. As he returns, a few words are exchanged between them, and Vera lets him in this time as well:

> She said, "I can't take any more. You tried to burn the house down."
>
> "I did not."
>
> "You did. Everybody here was a witness."
>
> He said, "Can I come in and talk about it?"
>
> She drew the robe together at her throat and moved back inside. (292)

This brief confrontation seems to be honest enough from Vera's side, but Burt denies her accusation and circumvents it by putting on his friendly mask and asking if he could come in.

Their challenging relation is circumvented and Burt sits down at the kitchen table while she is boiling some water. He once again manages to start in the wrong end when he asks when her friend left last night. Vera brushes this aside, and she turns to the past to explain when their problems started. He tries to apologise, but she does not accept it, and they cannot seem to get to the core of what it is they 'should' talk about. Instead, a daydream of Burt's is recounted:

> He considered her robe catching fire, him jumping up from the table, throwing her down onto the floor and rolling her over and over into the living room, where he would cover her with his body. Or should he run to the bedroom for a blanket? (293)

Ironically enough, he is filling the communicative void by imagining that he is saving Vera from a situation that he himself created by filling the fireplace to its brink. Saltzman fittingly describes this illusion as 'feeble and juvenile' (114). Again, Burt circumvents the truth, and what surfaces from this seems to be the old ideal that the husband should watch and guard his spouse. It is as if he in some desperate way needs to prove to himself that his wife still needs him, and that the situation he imagined would be just what he needs to recover the relationship with her. This passage contributes to the further ridiculing of Burt, and it exposes his lack of self-knowledge and self-criticism once more, thus only contributing to the hopelessness and deadlock he is facing. If Burt had a tiny chance of picking up the pieces initially, his actions have diminished this chance substantially. He continues to knock his head in the wall because something tells him that he must do it, even though his bump is getting bigger and bigger.

As with Inez in 'Careful', Vera is in a different position than her husband. She is established in a new setting where her estranged husband does not belong. She does not necessarily shut the door in his face, but she has certainly put on a mask of detachment in the way she talks to him. After having opened the Christmas presents, 'they did a little talking. But mostly

they looked at the tree' (291). Their situation makes conversation about colloquial topics the only option, and the rest of the time, they seem to be silent and look around the room. In general, we see that Vera continues with her normal household tasks and does not seem to be interested in bringing up any larger discussion with Burt. Thus, she is also a victim of the figure of circumvention. This becomes evident through the sense of compliance with which she handles Burt, as if she is bearing over with his hopeless attempts at ignoring the details of the past that have led to their current situation. This feigned and half-hearted attitude follows Vera throughout most of the short story. What we see in both of the characters is that as soon as there is potential for a more profound dialogue, they call it off by turning to quotidian questions and remarks, like in this instance:

> "Vera?"
>
> She looked at him.
>
> "Do you have anything to drink? I could use a drink this morning."
>
> "There's some vodka in the freezer."
>
> "When did you start keeping vodka in the freezer?"
>
> "Don't ask."
>
> "Okay," he said, "I won't ask." (293)

The first two lines of this quote make it sound like Burt is going to bring up something of substance. He calls her attention, and he gets it, but only to ask about something trivial. We see that as soon as the topic is drawn in the direction of trivialities, the conversation is off track and it continues that way for a while. Whether consciously or unconsciously, there always seems to be a reason to defer the difficult topic. This strategy is yet another effect of hiding oneself behind a mask. The figure of circumvention is used in such a manner – deliberately or unknowingly – that

their focus is shifted completely. Still, we should note, there is a tiny reference to their previous life together when he asks about her new habit of keeping vodka in the freezer. This question is however dismissed immediately, and they return to the serving of the vodka. The figure underlines this pattern of going back and forth, maybe with a probing question, but always returning to status quo.

All the disturbances are factors that further complicate Burt and Vera's dialogue, and the lack of time seems to be another such factor. In the same way that Inez has to go when she finally has fixed Lloyd's clogged up ear in 'Careful', Vera announces at an early point that 'I have to go somewhere in an hour' (292). In this way, she clearly signals to Burt that he has a limited time to put forward what he wants to talk about, and maybe also that she is not all too interested in hearing him out. Such a limitation of time represents another effective obstacle for their having a successful conversation. Their masks do slip into honesty at times, but when they are finally beginning to move into more personal matters and feelings, this does not last:

> "Vera," he said. "It's Christmas. That's why I came."
>
> "It's the day after Christmas," she said. "Christmas has come and gone," she said. "I don't ever want to see another one."
>
> "What about me?" he said. "You think I look forward to holidays?"
>
> The phone rang again. Burt picked it up. (295)

We see that much of the dialogue between them in this part of the story consists of '[c]ompeting injuries' (Saltzman 114), as both of them seem to be disappointed in the other. They are in other words getting closer to the core of their problems, but such a confrontational approach is not likely to lead to any understanding and amicable settlement, but rather a cold war, as Saltzman terms it (115). This time, the distraction does not originate in themselves, for they are instead

literally saved by the bell of the phone. This phone call does not only function as a disturbance, but is also the last straw for Burt because Vera's lover is presumably the one who is calling. This makes Burt's ridiculous actions reach their climax, and he cuts the phone cord while Vera is speaking. Randolph Runyon notes that by doing these things, Burt 'speaks instead [of through words,] through gestures', and he names it a 'furious sign language' (125). In one way, one could say that language does not get more plain and clear than this, but even if Burt's actions show a quite 'outspoken' side of him, the use of such drastic actions is also a sign of his inability to conduct a sensible dialogue with Vera. Instead, he tries to reconcile and get revenge at the same time: He *gives* Vera a present, but *takes* 'one [pie] for every ten times she had ever betrayed him' (292) and an ashtray (296). At the last incident with the phone, Vera's feigned attitude is abruptly turned to real anger, when she explodes and threatens that 'I'm going to get a restraining order, that's what I'm going to get!' (296).

As Bethea notes, Burt is 'literally cutting the lines of communication' (98), whereas *he* thinks he is re-establishing himself and 'thought he had proved something' (Carver 296). Then he reiterates the need to 'have a serious talk soon' (296). The irony is striking, but Burt is not able to see it, because he is controlled by the need to circumvent his reality. We get to know that '[t]here were things he wanted to say, grieving things, consoling things, things like that' (295), and he is returning and returning to try to say them, but doomed to fail. Burt is locked into the situation of neither being able to let Vera go, nor being able to bring up the obstacles between them in conversation. He is desperately trying to get things into order again, but completely unaware of the fact that half of what he says and does contributes to making his situation worse. Repeatedly, he signals to Vera that he wants to talk to her, but he brings nothing to the table when she gives him the chance.

All of this indicates that rationality is not the primary motivation behind Burt's actions anymore. Instead, circumvention and wearing masks have become elements so habitual to him that there is no way out of what he is doing. This 'imprisonment' is especially noticeable when he turns to destructive actions. In these moments, he is trying to prove to himself that no external factors are controlling and determining his actions, but the only result is that his straitjacket leads him back into the same track afterwards, as an even more pitiful character than before. In this way, his attempts at escape are only reinforcing his lack of alternative possibilities. Thus, 'A Serious Talk' ends with a character who finds himself in an impossible situation, trapped between two irreconcilable urges.

1.3 Conclusion

Through 'Careful' and 'A Serious Talk' we are confronted with two couples that have broken up their relationships, but who nevertheless have some unfinished business with each other that they need to take care of. In both of the short stories, there is an urge to 'have a serious talk' (Carver 296), but no matter which angle they try to start their conversation from, they talk around their problems instead of to them. Instead of presenting their honest selves to each other, we see that the characters put on masks that make them 'dance around the surface of their relationships' (Thomas 68) through dialogues that are determined to miss their goals. These masks have a twofold aim, as Jung noted in his discussion of the term *persona*: They influence how we are viewed by others, and they hide the true self of the bearer (192). Thus, the characters feel forced to wear these masks to comply with social norms and to create an impression of honesty. There are, however, moments where the masks are slipping, so that the true intentions and personalities of the characters come through. Nevertheless, these are only short moments, and the main development seems to be that the masks become a more and more integrated part of the

characters, so that it becomes harder and harder to discern the person from his or her mask. It is as if the masks have have been used so frequently that they have become a part of the characters, and the consequence is that the distinction between true self and masked self is erased.

It is here that the figure of circumvention manifests itself, and the reader witnesses countless instances of communication where the characters deliberately or unknowingly circumvent the 'forbidden topic' that haunts them and instead turn to superficialities. Thus, their dialogue essentially becomes devoid of meaning, and they constantly divert from their personal challenges by turning to colloquial and rather empty phrases and actions. It is especially evident that the men are handling their situation with much difficulty. With Lloyd in 'Careful', his ear is essentially one big absorbent of attention, and with Burt in 'A Serious Talk', his destructive actions are ruining his chances for the serious talk that he says he is after. Both put trust in dialogue as a problem solver, but they are not able to contribute with anything when they have the chance of establishing such a dialogue. The women in these stories have moved on and do not seem to have the same need to sort out their relationships, but they are nevertheless making several constructive attempts. However, they are also contributing to circumvention and postponement, because both of them say that they are in a hurry and on their way to something else when there could have been room for the serious talk.

The figure of circumvention contributes substantially to the creation of the plots and characters of the two short stories. This contribution, however, is not one that enhances the self-realisation of the characters, but rather one that narrows it considerably. Because of the figure that is created through these stories, there is no resolution and happy ending in sight. Instead, the stories are subjected to and determined by circumvention, and their resolution is substituted with the passive desperation of the characters. Especially for the men, there are no viable alternatives.

Even if there were any possibilities to get out of the corners they have painted themselves into, Lloyd and Burt would not be able to discover them. They are only moving back and forward between irreconcilable actions, and they are determined to continue this way, because none of them are able to view their lives in perspective. Instead, they are practically locked up in confined spaces that they either will not leave (like Lloyd) or that they return to repeatedly (like Burt), and this confinement is also reinforced by the disintegration of the distinction between character and mask. There is no end to this, and that is why the stories might as well end where they do. Similar confined spaces will show up again in the analyses in the next chapter, where silence will be the figure of interest.

Chapter 2:
'Anything to fill in the long silences': Dialogue of Silence

> Often it is not direct discourse, words spoken between characters, but characters' inability to communicate that becomes important in developing characters' attitudes, motives, weaknesses or hopelessness. (Champion 193)

Through the figure of circumvention, we saw in the last chapter how dialogue contributes to the construction and obfuscation of the different characters, and how it channels the different voices and opinions that are to be conveyed or hidden. When there is less dialogue than usual, or when silence takes its place, this changes the mood of the story and the attention of the reader. Silence opens for a very particular effect, which 'invite[s] readers to consider possible discourses, alternatives to silence' (Champion 195). Thus, we see that such a stylistic choice from the author's hand does not necessarily lead to narrative and discursive flatness due to a lack of information. Instead, it might give the story more complexity and depth. Graham Clarke makes the important and appropriate remark that '[t]he hesitant pause between two people can open up a gulf, or reveal an interior neither wishes to see' (Clarke 118). In other words, the space that results from silence is filled with something, and this something is often both momentous and problematic. Susan Sontag states that '[a] genuine emptiness, a pure silence are not feasible [sic]—either conceptually or in fact. […] Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech […] and an element in a dialogue' (11). She also notes that '[t]o look at something which is "empty" is still to be looking' (10), and this makes silence force curiosity about what causes it.

If we look at how Raymond Carver makes use of silence as a stylistic feature, a natural entry point might be Clarke's observation that Carver's stories 'mine silence and otherness. They

achieve a texture of nuance and shadow in which less is invariably more. A syntax of silence makes the glimpse the primary act of knowing and, ultimately, communication' (103). What the stories give us, in other words, are short glimpses into peoples' lives together, in which silence is often a quite telling mechanism, in the sense that it usually occurs when there is no positive outcome in sight. A recurring type of characters are the ones who seem merely to be existing rather than living their lives, and whose silence is part of this apathy. Roland Barthes's figure of *silence* deals with 'the amorous subject suffer[ing] anxiety' because of silence (167), which is only partly relevant for our purposes here. We will instead therefore handle the figure of *silence* through the following definition, which is inspired by the one from Barthes, but rewritten for the purpose of this thesis:

> The amorous subject (and possibly also the loved object) for a shorter or longer period of time refrain from talking to each other, either deliberately or unwillingly, thus creating a void.

Taking this figure as a starting point, the present chapter will look at the implications of silence and lack of dialogue through the analyses of two short stories, because, as Laurie Champion notes, 'understanding characters' silences is crucial for interpretation' (194). The chapter will examine what this absence of dialogue might cover up or keep hidden and how the figure of silence influences and controls the relationships and characters in question.

2.1 'It's like he *lives* there': Silence in 'Preservation'

Apathy and silence go hand in hand in the short story 'Preservation', which was first published in 1983. It circles around an unnamed husband who has been on the sofa more or less continuously for three months, after he lost his job. We get to hear that he came home on Valentine's Day with a present for his wife and the message that 'I got canned today' (383). His wife, Sandy,

seems to do whatever she can to cheer him up, with encouragements like '[s]omething will turn up' (383). This is a rather standardised phrase that people turn to even when hopes are not very high, and judging by the male character's unsuccessful visit to the unemployment office, there is not too much optimism in sight.

Silence enters the story through the husband's idleness on the sofa. He spends all his time there, except when he needs to run necessary errands, and this creates a wide-ranging apathy in him. We see that there is very little communication between him and Sandy, and Arthur M. Saltzman notes that 'he adopts a posture of equanimity that Sandy finds maddening' (131). This silence is obviously distancing the two from each other, and from what we get to know, there is no talking between them about their future or how the husband should get out of his degraded situation and into working life again. His lethargic state is further emphasised through Sandy's discovery that he is not making any progress with the book he is appearing to read. She reads a description in the book of how a man had been preserved in a peat bog in the Netherlands for two thousand years, and 'her husband's petrified figure comes readily to mind' (Saltzman 131). This incident constitutes the figure of silence in that it mirrors the lifelessness and lack of dialogue that Sandy and her husband are going through. As has been noted, there is very little dialogue between them compared to what we see in many other Carver stories. Often his stories have a plot that is mainly carried through dialogue, whereas the silence in 'Preservation' gives space for a more detailed narration of their situation and what Sandy is thinking. This reminds us of Sontag's words above, that a complete silence or void is not possible, because the fact is rather that the silence of dialogue is filled by content of a different kind. Thus, we must distinguish between silence of dialogue and complete silence, because even though the characters keep silent, so that there is no dialogue, the reader is nevertheless fed with information through the narration.

The narration will then contribute to upholding the silence of dialogue because it switches the general form of the story from being dialogue-based to being narration-based.

The non-dialogic narration is not the only element that brings the figure of silence to the foreground, however. Brief exchanges of words that are essentially emptied of content have the same effect, because their brevity underlines the silence around them. For instance, the initial communication of the couple is confined to these taciturn remarks:

> "How's it going?" he'd say when she looked in on him.
>
> "Okay," she'd say. "How's it with you?"
>
> "Okay." (384)

It is striking how the only phrases they use are polite remarks that are almost devoid of any real content, especially when they are in a situation where 'okay' is not the true answer to how they feel. Thus, they conduct a conversation that leads their relation nowhere but towards neutrality and hollowness. We see that this exchange is followed by silence, and indeed it only reinforces and carries on the figure, because their attempt to communicate strands so quickly. Each time something similar happens, the threshold for trying again will be heightened. This means that their atmosphere is developing in the direction of embarrassment, and that breaking the silence will be continuously more difficult.

When there is no conversation going on, we see that there is never a total silence in the room where the husband is planted in the sofa, because 'the TV was going' (384). The fact that it is just 'going' is an important element here, because nobody is watching it. The TV is only a background noise in this scene, and as Clarke observes, 'television in Carver empties events of significance' (115). The TV is spewing out words that have no recipient, and this contributes to a disembodiment of language. George Steiner emphasises this effect when he discusses the

'brutalization and devaluation of the word in the mass-cultures and mass-politics of [our] age' (65). Thus, the word in itself is devaluated and the figure of silence is once again underlined, because there is nothing sensible to counterbalance the mass of emptiness. The TV is only functioning as an 'endless, almost random and unregistered transmission of images' (Clarke 116), and a constant buzzing sound, we should add. In that sense, it is just another time-killer in the life of the husband, and it probably glues him even more to the sofa.

When Sandy suddenly 'yell[s] at her husband' (386), there is a shift and the all-consuming silence is suddenly broken. The story now turns into another phase, because their refrigerator is broken and they need to discuss this. Even if all communication could probably be considered good communication at this point, we see that the fridge draws their dialogue towards something else than their relationship, and the characters themselves are not able to see anything besides the practical problem they are faced with. Quite notable is also their struggle to express themselves meaningfully, which results in the echoes and repetitions of phrases like '[i]t's the Freon' and '[w]e need a new fridge' (387). According to Ayala Amir, such a 'mechanical repetition hampers the progression of talk, while disconnecting the word from its meaning' (28). This represents something of a deadlock, and Amir asks whether this is a 'symptom of words being drained of any personal content, or of their being too full' (33). The truth is, however, that it is both. The two are probably very conscious about not bringing up personal feelings and almost bursting with these at the same time. The consequence is that they are locked into a situation that forces silence on them.

More than being just a household appliance, the fridge can be read as a metaphor of their situation and relationship: 'this fridge can't be more than ten years old. It was nearly new when we bought it', the husband says (387). Through this description of the fridge, the husband is

unknowingly bringing up their relationship, a theme that is silenced in the rest of the story. If we read the fridge like this, we will see that they have gone from a relationship that was new and fresh into one that is ailing if things do not change. To expand this further, we might point to the fact that when the fridge is broken, it is goes silent and mute, much like the two characters. When dealing with the fridge, their silence is put on hold for a moment, but the focus of their conversation is still strictly on the practical matter of how to get a new fridge. This means that even though they are not silent *per se* in this situation, the gulf or void between them is still there, and their relationship is still silenced.

A positive change in Sandy's husband that comes with the fridge problem is that his apathy is temporarily gone, or, as Adam Meyer puts it, it 'draw[s] the husband out of his frozen shell' (130). The broken fridge is clearly an issue he can engage with, and he seems to be eager to find a used one in the classifieds. It is as if they both get a sort of kick out of this situation, which by others would be called a trifle. Thus, it can be read as a clear indication of a lack of excitement in their lives. For the husband – and probably also for Sandy – this represents something to fill the void that he has created through the last few months. Interestingly enough, the husband blames the '[g]oddamn lousy luck' for the situation with the fridge (388), and it is not too far-fetched to read his own situation into this cursing as well. He is unable to get a grip on his life and take control of it again. Instead, the ubiquitous silence has instead taken control over him, and it seems to make him socially anxious, because when they read about an auction of new and used appliances, he is somewhat reluctant to going. Meyer views this as a 'refusal to face a new experience' (130) because of the situation in which the husband has established himself. Sandy insists, though: 'I'm going to this auction' (389), demonstrating that she is obviously in a dire need of change.

When Sandy serves her husband dinner afterwards, his apathy and his silence are back. We never know if he comes with her to the auction, because the story ends at home, with a strange visual experience for Sandy:

> She looked down at her husband's bare feet. She stared at his feet next to the pool of water. She knew she'd never again in her life see anything so unusual. But she didn't know what to make of it yet. (392)

Here we witness, like Saltzman describes, that '[i]n predictable Carver fashion, Sandy's inarticulateness completes her bondage' (131). As they stand there without saying anything to each other, the figure of silence takes control of the narration as well, because the strange scene with the husband's bare feet also marks the ending of the story, only followed by the husband loafing towards the sofa again. As this might seem somewhat abrupt to the reader, Michael Wm. Gorra asks: 'what makes Carver's choice of an ending anything more than arbitrary?' (156). This question is however a bit misguided, because this ending is clear enough even if comes without notice. Typically in Carver stories, one will see that the endings occur just before a decisive moment. Meyer puts it as follows: 'we don't find out what happens to the characters in the rest of their lives, but we do have enough evidence to arrive at a reasonably certain projection of the future', adding that 'the reader can sense the impending cataclysm' (24). In other words, the figure of silence steers the story towards an inevitable calamity that the readers do not get to witness. In 'Preservation', it is still clear enough that the husband ends up in the sofa again, with all the implications that this has. In this respect, Arthur F. Bethea compares the story with 'Careful' and notes that 'the men retreat from life while their wives struggle for something more' (145). In other words, Sandy is trying to stay strong, but at the same time, we see that she is not sure how long she is able to tackle the situation and preserve normality, especially given the fact

that there is no physical reason why her husband is stranded in the sofa, and this makes her ashamed (385).

The title 'Preservation' is not picked from a phrase in the story, as opposed to many other of Carver's short story titles, but it nevertheless makes for reflections on several levels of the story. The most obvious ones are to the story about the man who was preserved in a peat bog and the fridge that can no longer preserve food. Additionally, the title resonates with the relationship between Sandy and her husband, in the sense that for the time being, it is being preserved, but nothing more. Meyer points out that the word can present us with both positive and negative connotations. It may refer to a salvation of some kind, but it also signals lack of change and keeping things as before, he says (130). In other words, the stasis of the husband can be viewed as an act of preservation. Furthermore, the word can also refer to containment, for instance in a hermetically sealed tin can. This notion of preservation shows that even though the containment might preserve the content to some extent, the content is sealed off from the rest of the world. In a similar way, the husband in the story is trying to preserve himself in the sofa, and by sealing off his own 'tin can', he effectively rules out any other alternatives for his future. He is putting the minimal amount of effort into keeping things as they are, and the figure of silence might be read into this in the sense that talking is too much of an effort for him in his current state. Bethea concludes that '[f]ar from preserving him, this retreat will only let him rot like meat in a broken refrigerator' (141).

Another formal detail is that Sandy's husband remains nameless throughout the short story. He is the centre of action, but is mostly presented through Sandy's viewpoint. Meyer states that this might reflect '[h]is total isolation from the outer world' (130). The vicious circle that the husband is unable to escape from leads to what was characterised above as his death-in-life: He is

living his life on a sofa with limited sensory impressions, and out of these few impressions (like the book and the TV), he is unable to take in any of them. He also shows several other signs of lifelessness: Bethea observes how, as the husband lies 'on the sofa, he seems almost dead, his eyes "shut," his chest "barely ris[ing] and then fall[ing]"' (140). This is part of the before-mentioned apathy that haunts him, and the totality of his namelessness and death-like state is that he becomes a sort of non-person. Unlike most other non-persons, though, he is not silenced by others, but instead silencing himself.

A general consequence of the silence and behaviour of Sandy's husband is that these factors alienate him from her and create a gulf between them. The current husband is not the husband that Sandy knows, and therefore, she does not know how to relate to him. It is as if a stranger is suddenly planted in her sofa. This creates a bashfulness between them that goes both ways. Sandy seems to be under the impression that her husband must be handled with care because of his fragility, and therefore she avoids confrontation. In other words, she tries to preserve the situation, which means that there is nobody to tell the husband to pull himself together. As he is not challenged by anyone, he is digging himself deeper and deeper into his hopeless situation.

The silence of the two characters naturally makes the visual aspect more important, and especially the sofa is beginning to become a hated object to Sandy: 'She couldn't imagine them ever having lain down there in the past to make love' (384). In other words, the sofa has changed from being a symbol of relaxation and a happy life together to becoming an object of detestation, because it has come to represent sloth. Similarly, the function of the sofa has also changed for the husband. Initially, it functions as a place that he occupies to get some space for thinking, but towards the end of the story, it is as if the sofa has occupied him instead. We see that there seems

to be a constant urge in him to get back to the sofa, and as we know, this is what he does in the end of the story, with all the implications that follow.

All the examples of how the husband confines himself to the space of the sofa show us that he is not able to face any alternative possibilities for himself. The husband's situation has extended from being a minor job-loss depression to something that impacts his whole life. An important part of his daily life has been cut off and he is not able to substitute it with anything meaningful. The result is idleness and silence, but it also works the other way around, so that the figure of silence is reinforcing the already hopeless situation. Sandy and her husband's dialogue is limited to polite remarks and practical clarifications, and a gulf of silence has opened between them. As mentioned above, Sontag says that genuine emptiness not possible in art because silence will always remain a form of speech (11). Thus, we see that even as the characters refrain from talking to each other, the figure of silence manifests a form of communication between them that breaks down their relationship.

The void of silence is also exhibiting the husband's lack of insight. He has lost his self-knowledge, and his lack of power to reconstruct himself as a complete human being leads him into determinism. Thus, he becomes a marionette controlled by the external factors in his life and the silence that haunts him and Sandy. Preservation of what has been is their non-threatening solution to this, but it results in a state of mere existence instead of active living, because the threats that the husband are not able to handle are intrinsic parts of life.

2.2 'On the edge of something': Silence in 'The Pheasant'

A decisive car trip is the setting of the short story 'The Pheasant', which was first published in 1973. The driver of the car is Gerald Weber, and the passenger is Shirley Lennart, his partner. They are on the road in California, and the figure of silence is introduced already in the first two

sentences: 'Gerald Weber didn't have any words left in him. He kept quiet and drove the car' (351). The notion of silence automatically brings with it the sense that everything is not as it should be. By stating that one of the characters does not have any words left, the story is implicitly introducing a conflict or lack of balance, and the reader will start looking for clues as to what this might consist of. Shirley, we get to know, is just dialling between radio stations and doing 'anything to fill in the long silences' (351). The couple appears to be quite apathetic, Gerald with his static sense of driving and Shirley with her meaningless actions. The cause of this awkward silence is revealed about halfway through the first page: 'Somewhere [on their way] she gave up Gerald Weber as a bad investment' (351). The choice of word in this inner monologue is interesting. By naming Gerald 'a bad investment', she is signalling an aversion against him, and not least, it is very dehumanising to view a man as one of presumably many investments in life, not unlike Inez's 'assessment' from chapter 1.

By necessity, the silence of the two characters in the car opens the scene for more narrator comments and more of the characters' inner thoughts. The story has to be filled with content, and when this content does not consist of dialogue, it has to unfold through the use of other narrative techniques. Sontag writes that 'there is no such thing as empty space [in art]. As long as a human eye is looking, there is always something to see' (10). By the substitution of dialogue with third person narration, the reader is likely to get a different and more detailed view into the identities of the characters – instead of mainly having to infer this from their utterances, as in Carver's more dialogue-based short stories. At the same time, identity is also created through the figure of silence itself, because our view of the characters is modified by the fact that they keep quiet instead of talking to each other. To Gerald, their car trip, despite the silence, has a therapeutic effect: 'He was glad to be doing something [...] not having to think' (352). As with

Inez from chapter 1, Shirley seems to have been thinking for both of them, according to her statements towards the end of the story. We will get back to these, but for now, we note that Gerald thinks that not having to think is a relief and privilege. People tend to use such phrases after strenuous periods at work or in personal life, and the car ride clearly represents a kind of freedom to him, a way to forget his problems or 'loose ends' (351) for a while. This corresponds well with the concept of the *road trip*, which is known from other literary and cultural expressions. Gerald's view of the trip means that the figure of silence does not substitute talking with time to think, as we might imagine, but rather with a void that he does not know the consequence of yet.

As mentioned above, Champion writes that silence in dialogue has the effect that it makes the reader think of other possibilities, i.e. what *could* have been said (195). In a literary analysis, however, it is problematic to add something that is not there. The actual short story is all we have and therefore all that can be assessed. For the characters themselves, there seems to be no alternatives to silence in the first part of the story, because they have nothing to say to each other. This is reinforcing itself in the sense that the figure of silence will, as mentioned before, only breed more silence. An interesting observation in the light of this is that the couple have differing views concerning the trip. For Gerald it represents a break with what has been, whereas for Shirley it only comprises more of the boredom she has had enough of.

The abrupt shift that is the beginning of the end of their relationship comes when Gerald hits a pheasant on the road. Death is a repetitive element in Carver's fiction, and here we see the death of the pheasant representing the end of the two characters' time together. Interestingly enough, this instance is also the end of the silence between them. Out of necessity, they begin exchanging some practical information about what is going to happen after Gerald has hit the

pheasant, but it is notable how these exchanges are only factual, unemphatic statements. The incident is not met with shock or surprise, but rather with indifference. This flat conversation continues for a little while, until Gerald feebly tries to give it some life: 'How well do you really know me?' he suddenly asks (353). In the context there and then, this question sounds strange and out of place. It seems to be an attempt at serious dialogue, but is very unexpected to Shirley. This failed try turns into a more than strained conversation:

> "I just said, How well do you know me?"
>
> "I don't have any idea what you mean."
>
> […]
>
> "We're just talking. I just asked you how well you knew me. Would I"—how should he put it?—"am I trustworthy, for instance? Do you trust me?" It wasn't clear to him what he was asking, but he felt on the edge of something." (353)

Since the figure of silence has been so profoundly present up until the collision with the pheasant, Gerald's question comes out of a clear blue sky. Shirley's answer demonstrates clearly that she does not intend to contribute to this conversation, and after a few unsympathetic answers from her, he gives in: 'If you don't think it is [important], then I guess it isn't' (353). What is so notable about this, is that the figure of silence clearly has a strong grip on which topics are acceptable and not. The longer the silence has lasted, the higher is the threshold for bringing up a conversation with substance. Gerald's insecurity about what he is really asking about also underlines this.

After this little interlude, the characters return to their silence for a little while, and this gives room for a contemplation on their history together, viewed through Geralds thoughts. This passage is initiated by a strange reflection on the basis of their relationship: 'They began living

together because she had suggested it' (353–354). Furthermore, their starting point does not sound too promising when he states that '[s]he had money and she had connections' (354). They seem to have been living a jet set life, or what Meyer calls a life with 'too much alcohol and too little communication' (118). Following this reflection, Gerald tries again: 'Do you think […] that I'd ever do something against my own best interests?' (354). He is maybe not the best at taking hints, because '[i]t still wasn't clear to him where this might lead' (354). Shirley does not want any more of this and tells him to stop asking such questions. Gerald's inquiries are probably an attempt at serious conversations, and they spring out of his self-reflections after having hit the pheasant. There is no understanding from Shirley, though, and this opens up a gulf in the sense that Clarke describes (118); neither of them can come through to the other. They converse a bit about trivialities until Gerald reveals that he killed the pheasant deliberately. One should think that this would call for some kind of reaction or disgust from Shirley's side, but she is remarkably careless:

> After Weber tells Shirley that he hit the pheasant deliberately, she gazed at him for a minute without any interest. She didn't say anything. Something became clear to him then. Partly, she supposed later, it was the result of the look of bored indifference she turned on him, and partly it was a consequence of his own state of mind. (355)

Her lack of reaction says something about the level of apathy the two have reached when dealing with each other. This is especially true for Shirley's view of Gerald and his actions and utterances. Even if she is obviously bored by the silence between them, it is as if she could not be bothered to react to what he is saying to her. This leads back to the notion that she does not want to invest anything in him anymore, and it of course widens the already substantial gulf between them. Sontag's words that '[s]ilence remains, inescapably, a form of speech' (11) are quite fitting here,

because they underline that the figure of silence can be quite telling, and as in this case, quite dismissive. After a while, Shirley seems to have a 'delayed' reaction to the incident with the pheasant, because suddenly she says: 'You take away my appetite' (356). The mood here is quite unpredictable and awkward, except for the fact that the figure of silence still dominates.

In this final phase of the story, however, the communication makes a full turn from silence and practicalities to an emphatic expressivity of feelings, but only on Shirley's side. It is without doubt very indicative that when silence is fully broken, it does not happen through pleasantries, but through confrontation. Through the phrase '[t]he car keys, please' (356), she makes it clear that she is breaking up with him. Strangely enough, Gerald is still not seeing the full width of what is happening and is only feeling 'on the edge of something' (356). 'We had some good times, right?' he tryingly says to Shirley in his careful tone, but is instantly clubbed down by her (356). As she is cursing him, the people in a nearby restaurant are watching their heated good-bye scene. Indeed, *scene* is a fitting description for these last actions of the story, because Carver is consciously playing with words and phrases from the theatre stage here: Gerald 'felt as if they were doing a scene and this was the fifth or sixth take', and he says that he will say goodbye, '[i]f that isn't too melodramatic' (356). This gives the impression that there is something directed and predetermined about the situation, as if it was inevitably steered in a certain direction based on a manuscript. If so, Shirley functions as some sort of director, but simultaneously, she is subject to the same aimlessness as Gerald, which can be seen through her boredom and aimless fiddling with the radio.

The little crowd in the restaurant of course function like their audience. For them, the situation represents entertainment, and they are watching it in silence until they start analysing what is happening. A trucker shares the surprising opinion that '[h]e should turn around and just

knock hell out of her' (356). This sounds ridiculously out of place and seems like something that could happen in a film. In other words, Gerald's and Shirley's actions are being watched as if they were part of an artistic performance. Gerald says to Shirley that he is going to 'find a job, a real job' (345). G. P. Lainsbury notes that '[c]learly this story is about an artist's crisis of faith and identity' (21). Rather than calling this the main theme of the story, as Lainsbury effectively does, a better solution is to name their artistic crisis as one of the causes that make their relationship fall apart. Meyer notes that this is an unusual couple for a Carver story, because the Hollywood jet set is definitely not part of his regular character gallery (119). Nevertheless, he shows us that they struggle with many of the same issues as his middle class and blue-collar cast. Rather than being related to their background, their challenge is a struggle with communicating and what happens when one has nothing to say to each other anymore. This theme can thus be named as a universal, cross-class theme in the stories of Carver.

Throughout the story, a somewhat disturbing silence is shrouding the two characters, and as was mentioned above, Clarke points to the fact that silence may 'reveal an interior neither wishes to see' (118). With the car as the setting of 'The Pheasant', the characters are 'locked' together in a closed and confined space, and the awkwardness that follows silence is emphasised. The longer the silence lasts, the more difficult and unnatural it would seem to bring up something of real importance. Going straight from silence to discussing more serious matters can get awkward, as is demonstrated when Gerald suddenly start asking Shirley questions about how she views him. In this situation, Shirley is very dismissive, as if she is only waiting for the right moment to leave him. The figure of silence leads them into a very static condition that has different effects on them. Gerald is calmed down by the silence, whereas Shirley seems to be stressed by it. Likewise, it is as if Gerald is given a depth through the silence, whereas Shirley is

getting more superficial. Still, Shirley is much more in control of the situation than Gerald is, given that she is the one who decides what is going to happen in the final scene of the short story. For both of them, the figure of silence represents a confinement that makes them unable to speak their thoughts, until Shirley breaks free from it. Gerald, on the other hand, is completely at the mercy of his surroundings.

2.3 Conclusion

In the short stories 'Preservation' and 'The Pheasant', we are presented with what Clarke calls 'a world of silence, of vacuum, and of absence' (100), but the analyses above show that there is something more to this silence than 'vacuum'. Keeping in mind Sontag's words that genuine emptiness and pure silence are impossibilities in art (11), we must take it that there is something there to fill the void created by silence. In the two stories that were analysed above, we might explain this something as a form of claustrophobia, or at least an awkwardness that results from the fact that the characters are 'stuck' with each other without being able to discuss or talk about their conditions. Both of the couples are confronted with something that is threatening their relationship, but the figure of silence ensures that this topic is avoided. Instead of dialogue, the stories give room for narration of the histories of the characters and their thoughts.

The figure of silence is particularly interesting in that it is a figure of dialogue that is constituted through the lack of dialogue. Thus, the readers are invited to consider the different possibilities, as Champion notes (195). The basis for doing this is the two men in the stories, who are both acting like they would prefer not having to think and face their reality. The husband in 'Preservation' does not seem to be capable of handling his own situation at all. He goes for the path of least resistance, which is to stay in the sofa and do as little as possible. Gerald in 'The Pheasant', on the other hand, is merely unable to interpret his situation. Either way, the result is

that the silence opens up a gulf between these characters and their women, who seem to be the strongest parties in these stories. Sandy in 'Preservation' is trying to lead a normal life despite the difficult situation of her husband's unemployment, and Shirley in 'The Pheasant' is clearly the one in control of her and Gerald's future.

Despite the engrossing quietness the characters are surrounded by, silence is also a form of speech, as Sontag notes (11). Therefore, saying that the figure of silence is removing any action from these short stories would be an oversimplification; there is no doubt that a lot is happening between the two couples even if they keep quiet through much of the unfolding of the plots. What silence clearly contributes, is the corrosion of the characters' relationships. It brings distance and alienation rather than intimacy and endearment, and it brings hindrances that are problematic or even impossible to conquer for the characters. The silence of the two men make them unable to describe or reflect deeply on their conditions, and thus, they have left the control of their lives in the hands of coincidence and other factors that might determine them.

The result for these men is that they have found consolation in an object – the sofa for Sandy's husband and the car for Gerald. It is as if these objects act as a kind of teddy bear – they are lifeless things that can comfort them and lead their thoughts away from personal challenges. These objects are different in one important respect, though. Whereas the sofa effectively 'imprisons' Sandy's husband in that it limits his freedom of movement, Gerald's car does the exact opposite. It makes him mobile and lets him feel the freedom of being able to go wherever he wants. Still, the result is the same, namely that the objects facilitate their escapism. There is no real escape in any of the stories, though. 'The Pheasant' ends with 'Gerald walk[ing] off into the sunrise, but certainly not in the uplifting tradition of the Hollywood hero', as Meyer fittingly observes (119). 'Preservation' gives us a more open ending, but not with any bright sky in sight,

since the husband returns to the sofa in the end. The sofa and the car work together with the figure of silence to determine the characters' futures and eradicate alternative possibilities for them. These objects thus come to represent confinement rather than escape, and the problem of the men is that they will not realise what is happening to them before there are absolutely no escape routes left. The grip of external factors is also evident in the next chapter, where we will see that crisis and the figure of anxiety are restricting the characters substantially.

Chapter 3:
'Everything is going to be all right': Dialogue on the Threshold

> In Plato's *Apology* the situation of the trial and expected death sentence determines the special character of Socrates' mode of speaking; it is the summing-up and confession of a man standing *on the threshold.* (Bakhtin 111)

As we have seen this far, dialogue (or the lack of it) springs out of specific settings and contexts that determine its form and content. When the situation in question has life-changing implications – either in a positive or negative sense, the limits of language might be exceeded, in the sense that language does not suffice to express what one feels. Experiencing death or facing the possibility of death are instances that might render successful dialogue impossible because the subject matter is too difficult to speak of. The results of this in terms of communication might for instance be inarticulateness, lack of words or failure to be completely honest about one's feelings. In the quote above, Mikhail Bakhtin brings up the notion of *threshold dialogue*. This liminal position implies that one is situated neither here, nor there, but rather in none or both at the same time, and it is this betweenness that leads to a certain mode of speaking that differs from what is seen – or rather heard – in other contexts. When Gérard Genette talks about a gap between 'what the poet has *written* and what he *thought*' (47), this can in our context be slightly rewritten to say a gap between what the character *said* and what he or she *wanted to say*. '[L]ike all space', Genette goes on to say, 'it possesses a form' (47). To define what this gap consists of, we might turn to the term *crisis*. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, the word origins in the Greek *krísis*, 'decision, event, turning-point of a disease' ('crisis'). Fittingly

enough, disease is a very important element for the settings of the short stories that will be analysed in this chapter, and it is an important factor in the shaping of their dialogues.

Dark elements are not unusual in Carver's universe; in Graham Clarke's words, '[d]eath frames Carver's world and suggests an underlying nothingness: the existential terms of an American *sans* its transcendental possibilities' (100). The characters may face dark pasts and there is definitely not too much to be optimistic about in their future either. Roland Barthes's figure of *anxiety* will serve as a fitting trope for the analyses of this chapter:

> The amorous subject, according to one contingency or another, feels swept away by the fear of a danger, an injury, an abandonment, a revulsion—a sentiment he expresses under the name of *anxiety*. (29)

This figure has far-reaching consequences for the dialogue in the following two analyses, but we will also see that the dark elements are partly relieved in one of the stories. The analyses will examine how crises form and determine the dialogue between the couples in question and how they struggle with handling dialogue on the threshold of catastrophe.

3.1 'Lousy luck': the Uncomfortable Truth in 'After the Denim'

What to make of the couple in 'After the Denim' is not a straightforward question. The story was first published in 1981 and describes how the routines of a couple are starting to dissolve because of an unpleasant change in their lives. James and Edith Packer decide to head for the bingo as usual, but find that nothing is like before: Their usual parking spot is taken, and so are their regular seats in the bingo hall. These details might sound as trifles, but behind all of this, something more menacing is starting to appear.

The story starts out with a scene of silence that is broken by the couple debating whether they should go to the bingo or not. We should note that this is not the figure of silence, because

it does not form the dialogue as a whole, like the silence from chapter 2. As mentioned, it is soon broken, when James asks, 'Are we going or not?' (265), without too much enthusiasm, it seems. Edith, on the other hand is more determined to go. Before this, she had 'pointed her foot and wiggled her toe in greeting' (265) when he entered the room. This sounds like a gesture of love that is performed with a wish for a response from the other party, but James ignores it. The details about them let us know that they are an elderly couple, and indeed, their laconic communication reminds us of the stereotype of couples that have been married for a while, especially with James's seemingly bitter and pessimistic utterances. Further to this, we get to know that 'Edith Packer liked classical music. James Packer did not' (265). The dialogue and the spare details that have been given away this far in the story signify that there is a problem of some kind, but leave the readers in suspense with regards to what it is.

When they arrive at the community centre for the bingo, they discover, as mentioned above, that the place where they always park is taken. This makes for a sour comment from James, but he is brushed aside by Edith's positivity. When they get inside, he finds another reason for complaining, namely the fact that their regular table has also been taken, by a hippie-like couple. This of course adds fuel to James's irritation, and Edith has to remind him that '[t]hey're not hurting anybody. They're just young, that's all' (267). Adam Meyer suggests that this indeed might be the problem: that 'the couple *is* hurting him precisely by being young, and by forcing him to acknowledge that he no longer is' (101). Randolph Paul Runyon also notes this when he comments that 'James's hostility is clearly a generational one', and he suggests that the couple in denims might be seen as a younger version of James and Edith themselves (114). Looking back to a time when their relationship was truly blossoming, James might be irritated with the unwanted nostalgia. In the present situation, the young couple represent the opposite of himself and Edith,

and James gets even more annoyed when he discovers that they are probably cheating in the game. Edith tries to calm him down, but when she goes to the toilet later, he feels the need to confront them with it. Runyon also points out that 'since [the denim couple] were occupying the Packers' usual seats their luck should have been his' (Runyon 116), which of course adds to James's anger. All of this might seem quite petty, but the mentioned critics do not take into account the state of mind that creates these situations and the comments from James. As we will see, by recognising the figure of anxiety, there are reasons behind James's behaviour that have not yet been revealed, and we will notice how these nuance him as a character.

It is clear that James and Edith have different approaches to and outlooks on life: Edith radiates a joy of life in both her actions and her words. When she is speaking with her husband, she is not too impacted with his mood, but rather trying to cheer him up and getting him to take a broad view of things. James, on the other hand, seems pessimistic to the extreme and almost misanthropic. Yet, when he says that 'this is the worst bingo night in history' (270), this may indeed be proving to be the truth, and this is where the figure of anxiety enters the story in a profound manner. All along there have been hints for the reader that this is no ordinary bingo night, even though the couple try hard to do things as usual. This make-believe starts to unravel when Edith comes back from the bathroom with a clear change in her actions: 'she handed him the cigarettes and sat down, not talking, not being her jovial self' (269). 'I'm spotting again' (269), she says, indicating that she might have a serious illness. Here, we clearly see that Barthes's notion of anxiety comes through and takes control of both Edith's gestures and speech. There is a drastic change to her, and she is no longer her smilingly and overbearingly self. The contingency that controls this behaviour is of course the notion of a possible crisis. The figure of anxiety brings with it the concept of the threshold. Being unsure or anxious about one's future leads to a

liminal position that represents a narrow balance between two scenarios with very different outcomes. Thus, established truths and situations dissolve and one is left in what might be characterised as a fluid position, with the impact that this in turn has on dialogue.

Through the word 'again', Edith is revealing that this has happened before and now the condition is returning. We do not know whether it is the first sign since then or whether they already know about it before they go to the bingo. James wants them to leave, but she says '[n]o, let's stay' (269). One could question whether she only tries to continue the illusion of having a normal night out, or whether she would really like to stay, perhaps to lead her thoughts away from what she has discovered. 'It'll be all right' (270), she assures him, even though it does not sound very convincing. As mentioned, Edith seems to be an exceptionally positive person, but James tries to look behind what she says: 'James checked how Edith was doing. But there was no way of telling' (270). We see that the anxiety that has gripped these two characters individually also impacts their relation, in the sense that it obfuscates their communication. In the face of crisis, Edith has changed, and James is not able to recognise if there is a discrepancy between what she says and what she wants to say. This brings us to the notion of the gap, which takes the form of a potential life crisis and contributes to distancing the couple from each other.

Edith's assertion that it will be all right is an interesting statement in the light of this. The phrase is one of the standard expressions that we use without reflecting too much on its implications. In this situation, the figure of anxiety functions as a backdrop and controlling factor for her speech, and it is important to note the possible tension between utterance and truth in the light of this. Furthermore, it is unclear whom she is addressing with this phrase: There is no indication of whether she is continuing her role of comforting her husband, or whether she is including herself as addressee when she says it. Words might function as therapy, but here they

probably only contribute to widening the gap between how she is feeling and what she says to James. We shall see that for the rest of the story, the characters (that is, mostly James) express themselves mainly through inner monologues, so that this distance increases. When James *does* speak to Edith, however, his words are very much controlled by the anxiety that their situation and fear brings.

In comparison to Edith, James is an easier character to 'see through'. Even though his motives are not completely clear, his personality is easier to grasp than hers is. From the beginning, he is established as a meticulous pedant, and true to the stereotype, he worked as an accountant before he retired. He is obsessed with order and not too good at handling things that appear to be outside their fixed pattern, such as the occupied parking spot and the fact that another couple have taken 'their' seats. Before they leave and when they come home, he is very busy with locking doors and checking that everything is in order. This is contrasted to Edith's more artistic inclinations. James gives an initial impression of only being a remarkably grumpy husband, but this is modified by the revelation of Edith's condition. Whereas there is a marked and explicitly stated change in Edith's mood, he seems to be the same before and after they go to the bingo. The important difference is that the figure of anxiety is now defining his personality, because the origin of his volatile mood has been revealed. His discourse plays with our sympathy so that we do not quite know what to make of him. There are certainly enough moments where he can hardly be seen as a flattering man, and we get the feeling that he is always balancing on a threshold, with the likelihood of taking some drastic measure anytime. He confines himself to an inner anger, though, reflected in his inner monologue after coming home, about what he would like to say to the couple in denims:

> If only they had to sit with him in the waiting room [of the doctor]! He'd tell them what to expect! He'd set those floozies straight! He'd tell them what was waiting for you after the denim and the earrings, after touching each other and cheating at games. (272)

We see that his own personal frustrations influence his cursing of the other couple, in the sense that he is indirectly referring to his own relationship with Edith and their current situation. In the middle of this excerpt, his addressee shifts from being 'them' to becoming 'you', presumably in the sense of 'everybody'. This underlines the comparison between this other couple and himself and Edith, and it makes his frustration universal. Thus, his change of intention emphasises that there is a gap between what he says and what he wanted to say. The breach in addressee halfway through opens up a space, even if momentarily and brief, in which the figure of anxiety is speaking. The figure takes control of this inner monologue and twists it towards himself because the crisis he is facing overrides his trifling everyday irritations. This is a very clear example of how figures control the characters, and it shows how powerful the figures are.

Another victim of James's anger is '[t]he lousy luck' (271), referring of course both to luck in bingo and luck in life. James seems to envy others who have fewer worries than himself (272), forgetting perhaps that going through extensive difficulties is something that most people experience several times in their lives. Even though his inner monologue has a quite harsh tone, we know that at this point, he is aware of the terrible and unspeakable that might have struck Edith, and a strong feeling of injustice and bad luck has come to him. Thus, we might suspect that his cursing of luck and the denim couple probably generates more self-pity in him than an actual need to do what he says he is going to do. In other words, he finds himself in a liminal position that is neither normality nor crisis (yet), and this affects his thoughts in such a manner that he is bringing himself down.

James repetitively points out that he does not feel lucky this night, and indeed luck (or the lack of it) plays a central role in the story. As Nesset points out, 'the bingo game serves as the story's master trope, sketchy as it is (and they always are in Carver's fiction)' (45). The portrayal of the abnormal and life-changing incidents in something as quotidian as bingo is perhaps both what makes the trope sketchy and interesting. It underlines the arbitrariness of life and all the factors that these characters cannot control themselves. There are also other similar symbols in the story. Arthur F. Bethea points out that Carver clearly makes use of such elements to construct 'a foreboding background' (119), and indeed, there is in the text a 'damaged street lamp' (Carver 266), a 'surf breaking on the rocks' (266) and cold air from the refrigerator (271). These elements all point forward to the impending crisis and gives it a veil of darkness and nervousness.

Continuing on the note of nervousness, we see that the figure of anxiety jams Edith and James's dialogue in such a way that their relation becomes something of an enigma. Bethea reiterates what has been shown above: 'Edith and James represent two different ways of living: she, cheerful and optimistic: he, grouchy to the point of being comic and relentlessly pessimistic' (120), and this influences their dialogue and relation. Nesset claims that they 'share a kind of genuine intimacy, however restrained or awkward it may seem at the beginning' (45), and Meyer describes them as 'much happier than most of the pairs featured in the collection [i.e. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*]' (101). However, these critics fail to bring up the fact that Edith and James seem quite distanced at several instances. From the beginning of the story, there is a communicative gap between them. Saltzman notes this scarcity of dialogue and calls it 'the natural, even sentimental, closeness of two people who have been together so long that they can anticipate one another without the promptings of extended conversation' (Saltzman 113). This description seems to be rather simplistic, as there is clearly more to say about the relation of this

couple than that they are so close that there is no need to talk. This view and Meyer's description above fail to take into account all the signals that there is something wrong. Rather than the quiet delight of being together, the couple is exhibiting the 'fear of a danger, an injury, an abandonment, a revulsion' that Barthes described in his figure of anxiety (29). It is the figure, more than anything else, that determines the dialogue and the actions that have been described.

When the two get back home, the figure of anxiety continues to control them tightly. The most obvious topic and its extended effects come with a great amount of fear and revulsion, as we have seen, and confronting it directly is an impossibility at this point. Towards the end, when Edith says good night (271), it becomes clear that the communicative gap cannot be overcome, at least not with words, because of their anxiety. Instead, a moment of intimacy is filling this gap: 'He felt awkward and terrified. He stood with his arms more or less holding his wife' (271). Still, the act of 'more or less' holding someone underlines James's insecurity in the situation and might signify that also their body language is suffering in the face of crisis. Facing a possible trauma is difficult to them, and it rules out the possibility of having a normal conversation. Instead, dialogue is substituted by James's frantic and almost desperate attempt at regaining the control of his life.

Towards the end of the story, James's restlessness and anxiety become more and more apparent. He walks around the house trying to control all the details, 'snapping off lights and checking doors' (272). Yet, the biggest 'detail' of them all is completely out of his hands, and we see that he is on the threshold of falling apart because this is so unfamiliar to him. Earlier in the story, it is revealed that he has a history of drinking (266), and that this has led him to take up needlework. That hobby seems to be his last resort in the current situation as well. Usually, one associates such activities with calmness, but he 'stab[s] at the eye [of the needle]' (272) and seems

to be sewing for his life. Here, the image (both literally and figuratively) of the 'man on the keel' is brought up again, after he and Edith saw it in the community centre before they entered the bingo. The picture of a man fighting for his life on a capsized ship parallels James's own internal fight, and together with the symbols mentioned above, it foreshadows the distressed situation that Edith and James are put in towards the end of the story.

The conclusion to their situation is, as oftentimes else in Carver's works, highly uncertain. As Bethea points out, '[b]liss is all too tenuous in Carver's fiction' (119) for this to be sorted out. Thus, what we are left with, is a couple that are put face to face with a situation inducing so much anxiety and trauma that they struggle with a language that is not able to sustain and convey their feelings. Instead of the characters attacking their situation head on, we see that their anxiety victimises and controls their actions and utterances. They are put in the threshold position, where their possibility of movement is limited because all the factors of their crisis is out of their control. The husband hassles with his 'impotence [of action] in the face of chaos' (Nesset 46–47), whereas the wife seems to tackle things with a positive attitude overall, but despite their attempts at handling the situation, we are not presented with any possible ways out of it. Rather, the characters are resorting to activities that postpone the inevitable point where the threshold will be wiped out – Edith goes to sleep and James takes up his needlework. These are only ways of killing time. Edith and James are undoubtedly balancing on a threshold that induces both anxiety and apathy: Their challenge is that everything is as before, yet nothing is as before.

3.2 'Something hard': towards Harmony in 'A Small, Good Thing'

A different, but related life crisis is depicted in 'A Small, Good Thing', which was first published as 'The Bath' in 1981. The version named 'A Small, Good Thing' from 1982 is, however, the version that will mainly be used for this analysis. The story starts out in a typically dark and

Carveresque mood. A mother, Ann Weiss, drives to a bakery and orders a birthday cake for her son, Scotty. The following Monday, on his birthday, Scotty is hit by a car. He seems to be okay, but when he gets home, he gets limp and falls asleep. They immediately take him to the hospital, where there is a lot of back-and-forth with his condition. Much of the dialogue in the short story is focused around how his parents, Ann and Howard, cope with and handle this extremely pressured situation.

The dialogue between Ann and Howard in this short story is interesting because it partly follows stereotypes and the figure of anxiety and partly represents a break with these forms. The parents' situation makes them experience the threshold between life and death when it comes to their son, reminding us of Bakhtin's notion of the special mode of speaking that follows such a situation (111). Obviously, a life crisis like the one that emerges in 'A Small, Good Thing' makes for unexpected reactions and feelings for the characters, and the story is constructed in a way that emphasises the conflict between what is said and what is hidden behind the characters' words. As Michael Wm. Gearhart notes, 'Carver generally eschews authorial comments in his stories in favor of brief, emotive descriptions' (440), and this is also the case in this story. The initial dialogue between the two has the character of being a masquerade or make-believe where they pretend to each other that the situation with Scotty has not affected them too much. It is probably safe to assume that they would have liked to be completely honest with each other, but there are probably social norms at play that tell them that they should not exhibit their weaknesses.

Thus, we see in this story too that the surrounding crisis controls the communication and constitutes a discursive gap between them, i.e. between what they actually say and what they would like to have said. Initially, their dialogue seems to manifest old gender roles where the

woman is the weak part who needs to be guarded and comforted by her man, at least seen from Howard's side: 'Howard told her to remain calm' (403). In the following pages of the story, he repeatedly says things like: 'He's going to be all right' (405), almost like a mantra that he hopes will contribute in making his son well again. We notice that this is the same possibly false reassurance as in 'After the Denim'. Contrary to Howard's outward calmness, Ann seems to wear her shock and fear on the outside already from the beginning. Her anxiety is manifest in her speech, but we see that she tries to get a grip on herself: 'It's fine', she says when Howard asks if he can go home to have a bath and change his clothes (404), and this is also her answer when Howard asks her how she feels. Once again, there is a notion of make-believe and social norms at play, as Ann is obviously not all right at all. It is as if she tries to conceal the truth to avoid being a bother to her husband, and this makes the figure of anxiety come through implicitly. The fact that they have to keep up this façade in such a serious situation underlines the fact that the crisis has created a gap between them, and, needless to say, this gap is an obstacle to earnest conversation.

When he is alone, we see that Howard too shows signs of weakness and echoes the figure of anxiety, in that he 'feels swept away', to use Barthes's words (29), by the thought of his current situation. While sitting in his car, he tries to be rational and tells himself that everything is going to be all right. This situation also gives him some time to reflect upon his life, but after this reassurance to himself, we are told that 'he felt a genuine fear starting in his limbs' (406). We see that the anxiety starts to take control of him, and it stays with him as he goes home. While there, he gets a mysterious phone call. The reader knows that it is the baker who is calling, about the cake that was not picked up, but to Howard, who knows nothing about the cake, this is an odd incident. In Gearhart's words, '[l]anguage clearly works for the reader, while it baffles the

character' (442) in this instance. When he comes back to the hospital, something has changed between him and Ann: 'He wanted to say something else and reassure her, but he was afraid, too' (408). The situation has become more precarious, and the gap between what Howard wants to say and what he actually says becomes very clear. Once again, it possesses the figure of anxiety and Bakhtin's notion of threshold dialogue (111). A different factor that represents a contrast to the stifled communication defined by crisis is that both Howard and Ann are praying in their thoughts that Scotty may wake up and get better. This indicates that the threshold can be overcome through a kind of dialogue that has no real or direct interlocutor. In other words, the characters are actually able to formulate these thoughts for themselves when they do not have to take into consideration that another human being is listening, judging and reacting to their words.

Yet, when Howard returns to the hospital and Ann, we see the same inarticulateness as in so many places else in Carver's short stories: 'They sat like that for a while, watching the boy and not talking' (408). In this situation, threshold dialogue comes to mind again. The parents are situated on a threshold without any knowledge of whether they will end up with life or death, because Scotty is hovering between the two. Words seem to have come short and 'the summing-up and confession of [their] standing on the threshold' (Bakhtin 111) is thus rendered through nothing but silence. Gearhart points to the notion of 'nonverbal prompting' in such situations and shows that 'substitution of implicit communication for verbal inarticulation becomes a self-conscious act on the part of the characters' (440). This means that whereas silence tends to not lead anywhere in many Carver stories, as was discussed in chapter 2, the characters in this story are moving on to another kind of silence. Here quietness seems to have a function in itself, because it comes with reflection and tranquillity for both of them. The outcome is a rare moment

where they see their roles and situation from the outside. A resulting realisation on Ann's side is that she becomes conscious that she has been locking out Howard from the situation (409) and making a space where only she and Scotty belonged. The consequence of not dealing with the situation together is that they have each kept their fear and despair to themselves, so that their anxiety has controlled them.

In addition to the fluctuating conversation between Ann and Howard, the doctor at the hospital, Dr. Francis, comes into the dialogue as a third party. He takes on the typical reassuring role that doctors so often assume in relation to patients and their next of kin. When he comes to check on Scotty, he repeatedly denies that he is in a coma: 'He is just in a very deep sleep', he says, clearly working his way around the word: 'It's not a coma yet, not exactly […] I wouldn't want to call it coma. Not yet, anyway' (407). As a doctor, he has to hope for the best and convey it to the next of kin, but here, his comforting is stretched too far. Instead of having the intended consequence of calming the parents, it becomes too much, so that his reassurances instead make the parents confused: 'He seemed full of some goodness she [Ann] didn't understand' (419). The doctor also continues this tendency in a remark to Ann: 'You try not to worry, little mother' (408). Gearhart writes about Ann's 'unquestioning faith' in Dr. Francis (442), but this seems a bit naïve because she seems to see through this diminishment ('little mother') of both herself and the situation. Later in the story, we are told that she is 'looking for any nuances, any hint of something behind his words other than what he had said' (412). Gearhart further notes that '[w]hen Dr. Francis is unable to express himself adequately in words, he resorts to more physical and formal displays' (442), pointing to the implicit communication that was mentioned above. For instance, he rubs his cheek to stall for time when he is not sure what to tell the parents. After Scotty's death, the doctor has to swallow all the reassurances he made, and characteristically

enough, he does it by saying: 'I *can't tell you* how badly I feel' (418; my emphasis). Thus, we are once again confronted with inarticulateness and the notion that there are things and feelings words cannot explain or describe.

An interesting incident that brings in yet another party for conversation is Ann's encounter with a family on her way out of the hospital. She is on her way home to have a break from her situation, and this random meeting seems to function as a bit of a relief for her. In the beginning, the mother in this other family thinks that Ann is there to bring news about their son, Franklin. Instead she begins to explain the situation with Scotty. These people represent somebody else for Ann to share her problems with – somebody who is not in the middle of her situation. Yet, they are also in a life crisis themselves, and they also feel the need to explain what happened to their son. In this respect, they function as a reflection of her own situation: 'She was afraid, and they were afraid. They had that in common' (414). What emerges is also a realisation of the universality in their situation. The meeting takes place partly in silence: We get to know that Ann would have liked to have said more, but again, language fails. Afterwards, we see that she is still situated on the threshold, because she is 'wondering if she was doing the right thing' when she decides to go home (414). Nonetheless, there is a sense that the interlude with the family is important to Ann's development and change through the story.

Language failure does not always lead to silence, as in the meeting with the other family. Just as often, Carver presents us with dialogue that misses its goal or even with clichés, such as this instance: '"No, no," [Ann] said. "I can't leave him here, no." She heard herself say that and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sort of words used on TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths' (419). Ayala Amir points out that the characters are often aware of using these clichés themselves (34), like in this example. Clichés

of this kind lead our thoughts to Carver's contemporary America and the mass distribution of television and other forms of scripted entertainment. Here, Ann blurts out something that sounds shallower than she would ideally have liked it to be. This could either be seen as a break with the realism and seeming 'non-scriptedness' of the story, or as a realisation that our reactions are sometimes quite foreseeable. Entering into a discussion of 'non-scriptedness' would be a pitfall, though, bearing in mind Bronwen Thomas's reminder that fictional dialogue is 'non-negotiable [...] and subject to the absolute control of the novelist' (39), meaning that it *is* scripted by definition. Irrespective of this, we see that there are many instances in the short story where the characters hypothesise about what they could and should have said, bringing to mind the gap between these distinctions. Here, as in many other instances, there is a mismatch between what is thought and what is actually uttered, in that Ann regrets what she says when she listens to how it sounds. Again, the situation is a result of her threshold position and the figure of anxiety.

Even if the dialogue of 'A Small, Good Thing' initially follows in the tracks of other Carver stories, there is still something different about it. Gearhart also discusses this and notes that the 'ability of one character to empathize with another's inarticulation is a rarity in Carver's fiction' (444). Whereas inarticulateness is simply met with indifference in many other stories, here it is instead the basis of a new connection between Ann and Howard. The narrator notes that 'they seemed to feel each other's insides now, as though the worry had made them transparent in a perfectly natural way' (411). In other words, their anxiety is still there, but they are in it together, and there is an awareness that the other's anxiety mirrors their own. This brings to mind Barthes's statement that '[a] figure is established if at least someone can say: "*That's so true! I recognize that scene of language.*"' (4). Here, the characters recognise each other's figure and it becomes a shared experience for them. There is also something of a realisation on Ann's side

after she has recognised that she needs to include Howard more in the situation: 'She […] knew in her heart that they were into something now, something hard' (410). When she returns to the hospital after going home, the situation of fear and consolation is turned upside down (415), so that it is she who has to console Howard instead of the opposite. Another change in Ann is that she has become more honest: '"I'm scared to death," she said' (415). This development towards being together in their difficult situation continues through the rest of the story: The tragic end to Scotty's life is not met with inarticulateness, as many other situations in Carver's stories are, but with a brutal view of their reality from Ann's side: 'Howard, he's gone. He's gone and now we'll have to get used to that' (420). This means that they are now dwelling in the figure of anxiety together, instead of being chased by it individually, so to speak. Thus, to return to Bakhtin, the 'expected death sentence' (111) is now executed, and the couple is not on the threshold anymore. Their anxiety is still strongly present, though.

In the vacuum that follows this horrendous realisation, they decide to pay the baker a visit to tell him a thing or two about how he has behaved towards them. However, instead of ending up in a confrontation, the baker asks them to sit down. He shares some hot rolls with them, because, as he says, '[e]ating is a small, good thing in a time like this' (424). Gearhart notes that his body language here 'substitutes for more than words—it also replaces socially unacceptable acts of violence' (445), referring to his avoidance of a possibly physical confrontation. It is the baker who does the most of the speaking in this concluding part of the story: 'Howard and she are notably silent for the final two pages of the story' (445), but despite the couple's situation, we get the sense that they feel calm and at harmony. What emerges is a mutual understanding that things did not turn out as they should have for any of them. Even if this might sound like a disheartening realisation, there is also a healing function in their words and a spark of hope for

the future in their little meeting. As Kirk Nesset points out, 'recovery is connected to listening, to opening oneself to others through channels of verbal interaction' in this story (61).

Through such an approach, the baker is the first character in a short story by Carver 'to use language in a cathartic sense' (Gearhart 445), and after this, they talk 'on into the early morning' (Carver 425). This moment in the story, when they first hear the baker out and then open themselves up in a lengthy talk, is the point that represents their truly *passing* the threshold, an element that we very seldom see in Carver's stories, because they very often end in uncertainty. Not only do the characters manage to overcome their anxious and hesitant dialogue; they also take an interest in the life of the baker. Several critics have likened this scene with its liturgical equivalent, the Holy Communion. Arthur M. Saltzman names it 'the communal ceremony of eating warm rolls and drinking coffee' (146). It is as if the memory of Scotty is preserved in the same way that Christians preserve Christ's memory. This is further expanded by Bethea, who notes that '[o]nce a devil, the baker is now an odd kind of priest' (160), and by Ewing Campbell, who notes that this religious allegory gives us a 'sense of redemption [that] is everywhere felt in the atmosphere of this resolution' (55). Thus, 'the Weisses do not gain their epiphany through words, but through their ability to empathize with another's pain in the time of their own sorrow' (Gearhart 446). This means that Howard and Ann manage to spiral out of the figure of anxiety and into one of hope.

As mentioned above, there is another version of this short story called 'The Bath'.[2] This other version of 'A Small, Good Thing' ends in uncertainty concerning Scotty's situation. In other words, it ends exactly at the same point as most of Carver's stories, which is the point where things could go both ways, but where our intuitive feeling is pessimistic. Our version, on the

[2] There is also a third version, the manuscript version, which was only published as late as 2009, in the collection *Beginners*. Cf. Kleppe 43–44.

other hand, continues with Scotty's death and the unexpected visit from Ann and Howard to the baker. As Bethea notes, '[m]any Carver scholars have compared [the stories] to show the change in Carver's fiction between his third and fourth collections, assuming that "The Bath" preceded "A Small, Good Thing"' (112). The truth is that the manuscript version of the story was more similar to the latter, and that 'The Bath' was the result of heavy cutting and editing by Carver's editor Gordon Lish (112).

Given the solemn ending of 'A Small, Good Thing', one might ask why it is still considered more optimistic than its sister story. One of the answers is that even though the latter leaves the possibility open that Scotty survives, it also ends 'on a note of existential terror' (Gearhart 439), before the 'therapeutics of passion' (Campbell 54) set in. One might say that eternal uncertainty is worse than tragedy with hope emerging from it. Campbell says that '[Scotty] must die in "A Small, Good Thing" in order to fulfil the thematic requirements of sacrifice and redemption' (53). Still, we see that his parents manage to break with the pattern of hopelessness that has been described in the other analyses in this thesis, and the figure, as mentioned, changes to one of hope. This seldom moment implies that anxiety is substituted with empathy, humanity and a connection with outer society. It could have ended where 'The Bath' did, but instead, it broke out of its confined framework.

3.3 Conclusion

'After the Denim' and 'A Small, Good Thing' present us with two couples that by Raymond Carver's standards seem to live quite happily with each other until their lives together are put to the test through crisis. Both of the couples are confronted with questions of life and death, and this puts them in a liminal position between these two extremes. As Bakhtin notes, such a

situation will characterise and determine dialogue in such a way that we may speak of a specific threshold dialogue that can be singled out from other forms of discourse. In the mentioned stories, the outcome of this is initially that the characters either refrain from speaking with each other or resort to colloquial phrases that have become devoid of meaning, like 'I am fine' or 'it will be all right'.

The threshold position makes established truths and situations dissolve, and we see that when the characters are on their own, several of them enter into contemplation and reflection of how they have lived their lives. However, there is no room for them to sit down and discuss their reflections together, so these are conveyed to the reader through narration and inner monologues. Their conversation with each other is characterised by their loss of control and a sense of falling apart. The result is a lack of honesty and a limited view of their own situation, so that they cannot seek each other to find the relief that they need.

A gap is opened between what the couples actually say to each other and what they want to say. As mentioned, their anxiety and traumatic situations are the main reason for this, and in both stories, their traumas are obstacles to having an outright conversation, given that its topic would need to be the unspeakable. The result is that it is difficult or impossible for them to bridge the mentioned gap. Interestingly enough, we see that in both stories the characters meet someone whom they project their own situation onto and gain some kind of insight from – the denim couple in 'After the Denim' and the other family and the baker in 'A Small, Good Thing'. In both short stories these others enter the plot through what seems like distractions for the characters, but we see that they have important impacts on how the characters view themselves, whether they like it or not.

In total, we see that the dialogue in these short stories is more or less determined by crisis and anxiety. Both of the women in the stories are very much aware of how they appear to others, but we see that they have to put this away in favour of feelings and utterances that they cannot fully control. The men clearly want to be there for their partners in the nerve-wrecking situations they go through, but they are also having a tough time themselves. These stories are yet two examples of works by Raymond Carver where language comes through as an inadequate means of communication, because the thresholds that the couples are standing on are too delicate and traumatic to be conveyed in words.

'After the Denim' ends on a quite dark note, with James and his uncertainty of what will happen to his wife. Nothing is resolved, so the outcome will never be known, but there is no solution or epiphany in sight for James and Edith. In 'A Small, Good Thing', on the other hand, the troubled communication takes an unusual change towards the end. We see that Howard and Ann are speaking more and more frankly to each other, and the scene with the baker is something of a breakthrough for them, in the sense that what he tells them seems to change them for the better. Thus, the story counters the view that speaking about things to clear them up is futile. In this story, the opposite is proved, and therefore, it breaks out of the figure of anxiety. The couple pass the threshold and begin regaining stability. Thereby, they also break out of the dark prospect that seems to be determined for them in most of the story. Howard and Ann *do* get a grip on their communication in the end, and a fragile harmony comes into being where it is least expected.

Conclusion

Dialogue constitutes an important, not to say crucial, part of the short stories of Raymond Carver. In many of them, the better part is dedicated to dialogue, so that this is the major element through which the plot is rendered. When this is not the case, we see that silence may play an important role, so that the lack of dialogue becomes palpable and we must instead listen to the dialogue that is implied in the quietness. Either way, we are dealing with characters that have a great need for expressing themselves and conveying how they feel to their partners. Thoughts and wishes do not always match with reality, however, and thus, the thoughts that are formulated in the heads of these characters often stay there, unuttered.

Carver's dialogues do not begin with the beginning and end with the end. Instead, the readers are often thrown into a situation that they initially do not know what to make of. The sense that something is not right in the dialogue is often there already from the first few sentences, but it may take longer to unpack what this something is. Despite this, the stories are marked by a remarkable unity of effect by succeeding in creating a passive intensity through the dialogue and actions of the characters or the lack of such elements. Marc Chénetier correctly writes that '[n]arratives that begin with a bang and move on to strange muteness, that document hollowness by omission, have a "message" that amply transcends the linear and sequential deciphering of the words appearing on the page' (166). When Carver's short story collections were first published, some critics found his stories to be meaningless and too simplistic. What they were overlooking, unwillingly or ignorantly, is that despite their taciturn style, these stories contain a large amount of details that must be scrutinised in order to grasp the full implications of the words that are on the page. Omissions or lack of dialogue cannot merely be viewed as

missing elements, but rather as details that are not there because their presence would dismantle the suspense and literary quality of the stories.

Another point of criticism has been that Carver's way of ending his stories might seem too arbitrary (cf. Gorra 156). The conclusive parts of his stories are in many, but not all cases constructed so that no resolution is achieved. Chénetier formulates a diagnosis of this stylistic choice by the use of the following suitable metaphor: 'Carver fuses his stories so that they detonate a few minutes after one has read them' (168). The readings of this thesis show that rather than being a result of arbitrariness, Carver's 'fusing' represent carefully timed endings that demonstrate the inescapable situations of the characters – or, as with 'A Small, Good Thing', the change in the characters. The mentioned inescapability will be described in more detail below, but for now, it suffices to say that close readings of Carver show that the structures are meticulously planned, perhaps in contrast to the impression that the stories might give if they were read superficially.

Despite the above features, the dialogues of Raymond Carver refuse to be grasped collectively and described as a whole. Sorting out what they mean or what the author might be trying to convey through them is thus an exercise that leads in different and contrasting directions. Part of this is due to what Chénetier pinpoints when he says that the content of the texts 'simultaneously covers, denies, implies, rejects, and suggests' (178). These features demonstrate some of the complexity of trying to encapsulate the characters and their dialogues. The scope of this thesis, though, has been to look at a selection of Carver's many stories where the characters are speaking *with* each other (to different extents, though), but where one could question whether they talk *to* each other. These are dialogues where clear and unambiguous

speech is the inner ideal of the characters, but where what is actually articulated takes a form that is instead having a negative or neutral effect on the listener.

Inarticulateness and Realism

What we have seen in all the six short stories that have been analysed is, to borrow Michael Wm. Gearhart's words, that 'these characters share an inability to articulate their frustrations in words[,] which causes their social, moral, and spiritual paralysis' (439). This inarticulateness is derived from a multitude of causes with different degrees of severity, but its intensity tends to make it more than notable when reading Carver's short stories. Indeed, the whole plot might circle around the inadequacy of communication. The common denominator is often that the characters struggle with the 'search for meaning in a world which resists interpretation' (Clarke 101), but 'world' in this sense does not necessarily refer to the world at large. Often, the characters have more than enough worries to deal with in their own private world or their closest sphere. Thus, they avoid the rest of society, and we see that external elements like TVs may signal nothing more than emptiness. The characters do in other words tend to be captives in their own self-inflicted situations, and in such a limited environment, inarticulateness and silence are frequently recurring elements. For many people, these situational factors would primarily be synonymous with a need and a space for thinking, but for quite a few of Carver's characters, there is no hope of being able to view one's situation with an outside perspective – it might even be an impossibility. Struggle with and lack of dialogue are therefore signals of emptiness rather than an abundance of possibilities to choose from.

If a shortage in communication equals a void, the opposite does not necessarily bring anything more to the table: 'Silence and excessive speech can be expressions of the same ontological dilemma; they are both signs of communicative difficulties and, within narrative,

work to problematize communication' (Dauncey 13). This means that quality and quantity are different sizes also when it comes to dialogue. Even if the inaccuracy of communication is clearly problematized in Carver's works, we must also ask whether communication can be regarded as a commodity that can be assessed. In other words, there is a need to problematize whether one could really evaluate speech critically. To do this, we would need a standard of measurement of some kind. As was brought up in the introduction of this thesis, one such standard has been older literature that highlighted eloquence in dialogue. A consequence has been that many have correlated the quality and purity of speech in literary works with the quality of the work as a whole. In turn, this has led to a fortification of the impression that all kinds of hesitancy and inarticulateness constitute unnatural and problematic features.

In reality – that is, if the real world is used as the standard instead – the truth is the opposite: Unfaltering speech would be unrealistic, because authentic speech is full of hesitancy, stuttering, pauses and other elements that break its coherence. If the goal is to construct the characters as realistic and human-like as possible, inarticulateness will be a necessary part of this goal. Dialogue is in its nature partly spontaneous, and therefore 'ideal' or 'perfect' dialogue is a problematic concept. Just as it would have no effect to tell somebody to stop being inarticulate in the real world, such a normative attitude would bring nothing into a literary analysis, and therefore it has been an aim to avoid it in this thesis. We must note, though, that there is a difference between assessing the quality of dialogue and assessing how it functions and brings a story together. These more formal aspects may tell us something important about the form of the work and the relation between its characters.

In addition to the realistic elements, there is also an element of authorial self-reflexivity in how Carver treats dialogue. Sometimes, like with Ann in 'A Small, Good Thing', he lets his

characters reflect that what they are saying sounds like something that is scripted, e.g. for a soap opera on TV. By doing this, he indirectly gives the reader a reminder that all the lines that the characters speak are in fact fabricated and scripted. Even though the analysis of fictional dialogue can be problematized in various ways, there are interesting conclusions to be drawn. Kirk Nesset's words bring us such a well-formulated sum-up: 'What is finally central to Carver's stories are the trials of his characters, and the less metaphorically unified, the less thematically stylized they seem as representations, the more stark and more vital those trials come across in the end' (Nesset 47). What this shows us is in other words that there is no correlation between stylised dialogue and realism. If anything, the truth is rather the contrary.

The Framework of Figures

The main framework for the interpretation of dialogue in this thesis has been *figures*. A simple manner of characterising these is to say that they are patterns in the dialogue, and this thesis has mainly consulted Genette and Barthes to define and concretise the figure. Compared to the other criticism that exists on Carver's short stories, this is a structurally different way of viewing his dialogues. Various features of these dialogues (such as silence) have been discussed by others, but not through the scope of figures. The strength of working with figures is that they open up for looking at both the formal aspects of the dialogue and how the dialogue works when it comes to forming and influencing the characters, their relationships and the themes that are brought up. Reading through figures enables generalisation of larger blocks of dialogue in order to better understand their totality and which direction they are leading the text in. The figures that crystallise can tell us something about the general mood of the text in question, and if they are especially prevalent, as they tend to be in Carver's works, they will also hint to the theme or the message of the text.

The three figures that have been explored are *circumvention*, *silence* and *anxiety*. They do not offer a complete overview of figures in Carver's authorship, but represent common and recurring patterns. Circumvention was brought up through the stories 'Careful' and 'A Serious Talk'. In relation to these stories, the concept of masks was brought up. In a figurative sense, these are disguises to hide one's true self that may be put on to make an impression upon others. The characters could be said to put on such masks when communicating with each other, and this is a hindrance for their honesty. The masks seem to be governed by social norms regarding what is acceptable or not, but on several instances, the masks slip, so that we get a glimpse of moments where the characters are able to view themselves with an outside perspective. Listening to each other, or rather, the failure to do so, is also problematized in these stories. There are wishes for restorative talks, but these do not take place, mainly because of the factors that have been described. The men seem desperate in trying to keep on their faltering relationships, whereas there is less of an interest from their women. Instead, we are presented with a constant deferral of the difficult topic, and there is a sense that the women are too busy to set aside some time for sorting things out.

Silence was explored in the short stories 'Preservation' and 'The Pheasant'. The starting point for the analyses was that the couples in these stories are experiencing an awkward quietness in their relationships. Instead of dealing with issues that clearly need sorting out, a far-reaching apathy is haunting several of the characters. They console each other with implausible reassurances that everything will be all right, but these sound more like empty phrases and failed attempts at dialogue than anything else. To fill the void of the missing dialogue, the voice of the narrator is foregrounded in these stories, and this gives us a different insight into the characters than if the stories had been more dialogue-based. In both of them, the notion of death lingers in

the background, through a description of a dead man that was preserved in a peat bog, a history about the death of a father and a car that runs over a pheasant. This tells strongly of how these people are letting life pass by rather than living it to the fullest, and it once again underlines their silence. The characters feel this acutely because they are to a certain point aware of their situations, but nevertheless unable to address them.

The last two stories, 'After the Denim' and 'A Small, Good Thing', bring up the figure of anxiety. Communication can be difficult when one discovers a possible crisis or when one is situated in the middle of one. The result is strained dialogue between couples that seem to have lived good lives together. We see clearly that facing a crisis has different effects on the different characters in the stories, also concerning which sides of their personality they want to hide or obfuscate for others. They try to reassure each other, but their empty-sounding phrases fall on stony ground in their grave settings. They are all living through anxiety for their future and we find them situated on a threshold between life as it has been and the possibility of its ending. With this comes a loss of control, which may either turn into frustrations and anger or epiphany and redemption.

We may use Kathleen Westfall Shute's words to sum up what these three figures are dealing with. She says that '[i]n a world where ordinary kindness seems so often proscribed, where the larger community seems simply not to exist, we are not surprised that understanding of the self and others is limited, communication negligible or, worse, mere "human noise"' (121–122). By living in vacuum-like spaces, many of Carver's characters limit their worlds substantially, so that their thinking becomes quite narrow. This observation leads us to the implications of all the figures above and their manifestations in the short stories.

Figuration and Determinism

The problem of not being able to speak one's mind is not in any way unusual, but as this is a repetitive feature in Carver' short stories, it is interesting to look at why and how the texts construct this inability through figures. At a general level, this obviously has to do with the contextual contingencies of the characters in question. This means that one or more external factors are causing and creating the inadequacy of the characters' oral expressivity, and this inadequacy emerges through the figures of their dialogue. This thesis has aimed to explore some of these figures and try to account for how they work as essential and determinative plot elements, in the sense that they bring the story in a certain direction. This direction – in the works of Carver – is often one that narrows down the scope of action for the characters and decreases the number of possible outcomes.

As the close readings have demonstrated, the characters in question are more or less locked up in situations without any clear possibilities of escape. For many of them, the pattern of their acts is repetitive and predictable, thus reinforcing the figure in question. The strong opposition between what they want for themselves and the realities that they face creates a deadlock with no constructive outlet. Another factor is that these patterns regularly intertwine with a spatial confinement, such as in 'Careful' and 'Preservation', so that the total effect is further strengthened. This means that the feeling of being locked up is both physical and psychological, and their helplessness is often both a dominant factor and their weakest point. Arthur F. Bethea puts it this way: 'we should differentiate between characters who lack the intellectual, emotional, and economic resources to improve their lives and a world that prevents transcendence regardless of the characters' efforts. If both visions are deterministic, Carver's is generally the former' (5). What he is saying is thus that these characters are their own worst

enemies, so to speak – that they are determined mainly by factors that originate in themselves. There are however also several instances where the primary motivations of their actions or speech seem to come from the outside world. Implied in this lies the observation that our private domain is partly controlled and invaded by the social norms of outer society and its scripted or habitual way of talking, as seen through Ann's realisation of this in 'A Small, Good Thing'. This is a partly political statement, because it implicitly leads to the conclusion that modern mass culture has a sedative effect on us and weakens our judgemental power. Additionally, it signals a disembodiment of language, in the sense that some of our utterances originate in society at large instead of in ourselves.

Yet, the major proportion of the discussion of this thesis has to do with the characters themselves. Quite a few of them are not able to see themselves from the outside. They lack the insight that is needed to break out from the confined spaces and dialogues they occupy, and the figures of their speech are therefore starting to control them. Several of them are caught in a catch-22 between not being able to say the 'right' words that might dissolve their problem and not being able to let go and continue in their lives. Others are involuntarily put in a situation that is in itself inescapable, because they are facing a crisis, or 'decision, event, turning-point of a disease', as the original Greek word means ('crisis'). Some of them are also too weak and apathetic to get a grip on themselves and their situation. This goes especially for the men in the short stories that have been explored in this thesis. Even if the women are not able to handle their situations either, they are generally more independent and stronger than their male counterparts. It is however outside the scope of this thesis to read any gender politics into this. In general, the characters let themselves be controlled by the coincidences of life or by others, instead of taking control of their own lives. Their actions are only feeble attempts at avoiding this, which they have

to try because the 'only way for them to validate themselves is through the performance of some act—any act—that gives them the illusion of free will' (Atlas 96).

It is as if there are too many constants and too few variables for the people in these stories. This does not sound like a recipe for success when it comes to literature in general, but for Carver, it is. Therein lies the tension, and therein lies the stories' value and contribution to literature. We see that the characters fail to perform the acts that could have given them a free will and instead reinforce the figures of their dialogues. Likewise, the figures of dialogue reinforce the problems of the characters. This dialectical effect is an important part of what drives the action and plots in the stories, because it functions as a catalyst. Yet, the story 'A Small, Good Thing' manages to spiral out of its dominating figure and the determinism that is hanging over its characters. We should note, though, that this escape can only happen through the help of an intermediary (i.e. the baker) from outside the confined, 'two-dimensional' and determined worlds of the rest of the stories. By putting this surprising development of 'A Small, Good Thing' up against the hopelessness of the other stories, Carver seems to leave the final conclusion to his readers. When all is said and done, we are confronted with nothing short of a classic question in a modern coating: Are we determined by external factors, or are we bound only by ourselves and our failure to execute our free will? Carver does not judge, he only asks.

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