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More Than Meets the Eye: Technique and Themes in the Poetry of Raymond Carver

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I. Introduction

This project is an in-depth study of the poetry of Raymond Carver, motivated by the significant lack of serious critical attention that Carver's poetry has received. Many scholars have focused solely on his fiction, some, such as Fred Chappell, going as far as to claim that Carver was "not a poet" (29). This trend has started to reverse in recent years as scholars such as Arthur Bethea and Sandra Lee Kleppe have published articles dedicated to studying Carver's poetry as poetry. This paper builds on arguments made by Bethea and Kleppe, and reacts to scholars who have downplayed the effectiveness of Carver's poetry. I argue that Carver is a poet, and that his poetry is indeed poetry. By examining the different poetic devices and techniques that Carver experiments with, I show that his poetry is worthy of critical attention based on its technical merit alone.

In addition to addressing Carver's poetic technique, I examine the representations of alcoholism and mortality in his poetry. These two themes dominate much of Carver's body of poetry, and provide a more intimate window into Carver's psyche than do his stories. Carver acknowledges that the speaker in his poems is him, and claims that his poetry "can be much more personal than [his] fiction" (Gentry 59). Given this, his poetry provides valuable insights into two of the largest influences that shaped his career—his alcoholism and his cancer. Because the dominant trend in Carver's career was to either write poetry or fiction during a given period, certain biographical factors are more relevant to the poetry than the prose, and a close examination of the poetry lends itself to an interesting biographical study.

But Carver's poetry is more than just a catalog of valuable biographical insights. Carver's poetry represents an understudied body of work that is highly expressive and unique. Although Carver tended to separate his periods of writing poetry from those of writing prose, the two are still fundamentally linked, and no study of Carver the writer would be complete without a serious study of Carver the poet. Carver began and ended his writing career as a poet, and although his fiction is remembered as his greatest success, he took great pride and satisfaction in writing poetry, and his poetry deserves to be read with as much care and scrutiny as it was written with.

II. Raymond Carver's Poetic Technique

In the afterword to Raymond Carver's two-act play, *Carnations*, written in the spring of 1962 when Carver was twenty-three years old, William Stull quotes Carver as saying that he "wanted to write anything—fiction of course, but also poetry, plays, scripts...anything that involved putting words together to make something coherent and of interest to someone besides [him]self." Carver went on to co-write two more one-act plays, (*The Favor* and *Can I Get You Anything?*) and a screenplay (*Dostoyevsky: A Screenplay*) with Tess Gallagher, and authored occasional essays, but he dedicated the vast majority of his career to writing short stories and poems. Carver's reputation rests almost entirely on his short stories, and until recently his poems have remained largely "understudied and undervalued" (*New Paths* xv) by the critical community. A new edition of critical essays on Carver, *New Paths to Raymond Carver* (2008) focuses equally on his poetry and prose, attempting to view them as "interconnected parts of an artistic whole" (inset). Carver's prose and poetry are indeed interconnected, but for the purposes of this essay, I wish to focus on the purely poetic merit of his poetry, as independent from his prose.

There has been a critical tendency among the limited number of critics who have even addressed Carver's poetry at all to view Carver as a fiction writer who happened to write poetry. In his book *A Way of Happening: Observations of Contemporary Poetry*, Fred Chappell discusses *A New Path to the Waterfall*, and concludes that "the only trouble with Raymond Carver's poems is that he was not a poet" (29). A. O. Scott argues that Carver's poetry simply serves "for serious

readers of Carver's fiction, as a useful storehouse of biographical information" (as quoted in Lainsbury 146). Kirk Nessel treats Carver's poetry in just this way in his book *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study*, referring to poems only when they reveal something new about the stories. Other critics, such as Arthur Bethea and Sandra Lee Kleppe have countered with arguments that Carver's poetry is "an impressive poetry that deserves recognition on its own terms" (Bethea, as quoted in Lainsbury 145) and that Carver's poems are "worthy of attention in their own right" ("Four More Priamels" 61).

Carver's own feelings on his status as a poet or fiction writer vacillated over the course of his career. In a 1983 interview Carver claimed, "I'm not a 'born' poet" (Gentry 48), suggesting that poetry was more of a secondary pursuit for him. This was reinforced years later, when in a 1987 interview Carver said that "for many years I was an occasional poet," writing poetry "whenever I had the chance and wasn't writing stories" (Gentry 217-8). However, this relationship was completely reversed during the years when he was writing *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* (1985), *Ultramarine* (1986), and *A New Path to the Waterfall* (1989), when poetry clearly became his primary focus, and stories were spoken of in relation to his poems. When questioned about his prolific poetry output between 1984 and 1986, Carver revealed his reverence for poetry, saying "when I'm writing poems, I feel there's nothing in the world so important. You know, as far as I'm concerned, I'd be happy if they simply put 'poet' on my tombstone. 'Poet'—and in parentheses, 'and short story writer'" (Gentry 219). In one of the final interviews ever conducted with Carver, he reminds the

interviewer, “you must remember, I’m a poet. I suppose I put my stories together in a similar fashion to how I put my poems together” (Gentry 244).

Much of this vacillation may have been due to the fact that Carver’s periods of writing fiction and poetry were for the most part distinct from one another. In a 1982 interview, he claimed that he “started writing short stories and poetry at the same time” (Gentry 13), but in a 1986 interview changed his story, saying, “I think it’s poetry first with everyone; and it certainly was with me” (Gentry 136), and again in a 1988 interview, he said that he “started writing poetry before [he] started writing fiction” (Gentry 244). In any case, he often refers to what he calls his “red letter day,” on which, at the age of twenty-three, he received acceptance letters for his first poem and his first short story (Gentry 13, 36, 136, 217, 244). Up until that point, he claims he had been dedicating an equal amount of time to both poems and stories, but after his “red letter day,” he decided that he was “going to have to make a decision as to where to put the energy and strength [he] had. And [he] came down on the side of the short story” (Gentry 217).

Over the next several decades, Carver went back and forth between writing poetry and writing fiction, generally separating the two. He commented on this, saying “some writers write poetry and fiction at the same time, they can move easily from this to that, but I don’t seem to be able to work that way. When I’m writing fiction, I’m in a period of writing fiction; when I’m writing poetry, everything I touch seems to turn to poetry” (Gentry 223). Several times in his career he appeared to think that he was done switching back and forth, and that he

was going to stick to one or the other. In 1978, he was quoted as saying, “a year ago I thought I’d never write another poem” (Gentry 8). In 1983 he referred to his “conscious decision some years ago” that he was going to focus on fiction, adding “and that’s what I’ve done” (Gentry 59). In 1988, he inadvertently predicted the future, saying “when I’m writing poems, I don’t know if I’ll ever write a short story again, I feel incapable of it” (Gentry 241). Carver died in 1988, and never did write another short story.

Regardless of whether Carver should be considered a poet or short story writer or both, at the beginning of his career, he was simply a writer, and he needed to write quickly. Carver had two children by the time he was twenty years old, and he and Maryann worked very hard to support their family. Carver was forced to take a variety of what he called “crap jobs” (Gentry 37) just to pay the bills, and therefore had limited time for writing. In an interview, Carver said that early in his career as a writer he came to the realization that the only sorts of things he was going to be able to write were things that he could “finish and be done with in a hurry” (Gentry 37). Once in an interview, Carver actually claimed that at one point, when time was particularly scarce, he “wrote poems because [he] didn’t have the time to write short stories” (Gentry 9). With this in mind, it seems that Carver’s tendency toward the shorter literary forms was determined for him more than it was chosen by him.

Furthermore, because the Carvers’ financial situation was so tight, Carver felt that he couldn’t afford to invest the sort of time necessary to write a novel without any guarantee of a return. He said that he “needed to write something [he]

could get some kind of a payoff from immediately, not next year, or three years from now. Hence, poems and stories” (Gentry 37). If Carver’s relationship to short stories and poems was originally one of necessity, I believe it evolved into one of dedication and passion, especially with respect to poetry. Later in his career, when he had enough money and free time to write whatever he pleased, he still wrote almost exclusively short stories and poems. In the final months of his life, after being diagnosed with terminal cancer, he dedicated himself to writing one final volume of poetry¹, suggesting a deep appreciation for the form that went beyond instant gratification.

Before focusing on the poetic elements present in Carver’s poetry, it is worthwhile to provide a recap of some of the reasons why critics have overlooked the achievement of Carver’s poetry as poetry. First of all, Carver tended to approach poetry as not entirely dissimilar from prose. Carver has commented on this on several occasions in interviews, saying of his poems and stories, “they’re narrative, I think, with a beginning, a middle and an end” (Gentry 244), and again, “I believe plot line is very important. Whether I am writing a poem or writing prose I am still trying to tell a story” (Gentry 9). Elsewhere, Carver referred to

¹ As I argue elsewhere, Carver never really accepted the fact that his life and career were ending, so it may be misleading to say that he knew *A New Path to the Waterfall* would be his final book. In fact, Carver hinted at plans to write more short stories, or possibly a novel after it. In a 1987 interview, when asked if he had plans to write a novel, Carver responded: “Well, nowadays I can write what I want, not just stories, so maybe I’ll do it...I’m thinking about a longer story in any case...which might turn into a novel” (*Prose as Architecture*). Elsewhere, in another 1987 interview, when asked about his comments in *Fires* that in order to write a novel, the author should be living in a world that “makes sense,” Carver said that he felt he had arrived at such a place, and when asked outright if he had plans for a novel, answered “Yes. Maybe. Maybe after I finish this new manuscript of poems [*A New Path to the Waterfall*]” (Campbell 99-100). Nonetheless, the most intimate images of Carver’s final moments of life appear in the form of poems in *A New Path to the Waterfall*.

writing a short story, “like writing a poem” (Gentry 26), building it one line at a time.

Thematically, Carver’s poems have a great deal in common with his short stories, and some of the same issues are addressed in both his stories and his poems. The theme of family obligations is dealt with in the story “Elephant,” in which the protagonist is constantly hounded by his mother, children and ex-wife for loans, as well as in the poem “The Mail” (148)², which involves the speaker sorting through the numerous pleas for money included in the day’s mail. Some stories, such as “Why Don’t You Dance,” have even closer parallels to poems—in this case “Distress Sale”—which is essentially a poetic version of that story.

Actually, Carver wrote “Distress Sale” first, and later elaborated the image of the yard sale into a short story. He did the same thing with the poem “Late Night with Fog and Horses,” later elaborating the same events into the story “Blackbird Pie” (Gentry 179). Carver once claimed that reading and writing poetry is “the best training that a young writer can undergo” (Gentry 13), and this suggests that the poems “Distress Sale” and “Late Night with Fog and Horses” were almost like practice versions of the later stories, but I think this understates the value of the poems. Much of Carver’s poetry is indeed narrative, but it is easy to overemphasize this fact. The consequence is that many critics overlook the other poetic forms that Carver used to great effect over the course of his career.

Carver’s poetry underwent enough evolution over the course of his relatively brief career that it is difficult to identify any particular poem as

² All Carver poems cited in this paper are from *All of Us*.

representative of his style. Typically, his poems are unrhymed, often with arbitrary-seeming line and stanza breaks, frequently lacking stanzas altogether. The poems addressed later in this section are the more exceptional examples of Carver's use of traditional poetic elements—the more obvious subjects for discussion—but the truth is that the majority of Carver's poems do not advertise themselves as poetry beyond their presentation on the page. Many of Carver's poems are presented as poems but lack some of the most obvious elements that make a poem a poem, and require careful consideration to reveal their poetic elements. One such poem is “The Jungle” (158-9), from *Ultramarine*.

“The Jungle” is a brief, four stanza narrative poem about a man and a female flight attendant flying high over the Brazilian jungle. Told in third-person narration, the poem recounts the meeting of the flight attendant and the man, who seems to be mesmerized by the “beautiful flight attendant[’s]” “beautiful hands.” The poem is highly understated, leaving much unsaid and open to the reader's imagination:

So many impossible things	10
have happened,	
he isn't surprised when she	
returns to sit in the	
empty seat across from his.	
“Are you getting off	15
in Rio, or going on to Buenos Aires?”	

Once more she exposes
 her beautiful hands.
 The heavy silver rings that hold
 her fingers, the gold bracelet 20
 encircling her wrist.

This poem is unrhymed throughout, and lacks any regular meter, but it does feature a rhythm of sorts, centered on the recurring alliteration of the initial “h” as in lines 11-12 and 18-20. Although the short lines may seem to be broken up arbitrarily, they also guide the reader’s attention, privileging the words “hands,” “hold,” “bracelet” and “wrist,” at the ends of lines, focusing the readers attention on the same hands that have captured the attention of the man in the poem. The poem further imitates the man’s experience for the reader by making use of sentence fragments, such as at the end of the first stanza—“Off to his left, / far below, some lights / from a village high / on a hill in the jungle.”—or again at the end of the third stanza with the image of the flight attendant’s jewelry, to duplicate the sense of casual observation without being overtly narrative.

Read as a whole, “The Jungle” may not appear to be much more than a very short story, but when examined closely, it reveals several key components— alliteration, meticulous lineation—that set it apart from Carver’s fiction. As Arthur Bethea argues, “Carver’s poetry is poetry because it has a technique beyond narrative. The exact word matters, the line matters, sound matters, structure matters, the exact placement of words on the page matters” (196). Carver embraced the connections between poetry and prose, and this is clearly

evident in most of his poetry, but he still made some distinctions between the two forms. These distinctions are not always clear, as Carver seems to have viewed prose and poetry as existing on a continuum rather than being two clear alternatives, but even the most prosaic of Carver's poems employ techniques not seen in his prose.

One of Carver's most prosaic poems is "Lemonade" (284-7) from *A New Path to the Waterfall*. In "Lemonade," although the poem appears to be lineated almost as though it were a passage of prose on the page, with long lines and no stanza breaks, a close reading reveals careful placement of words and sounds, particularly at the beginnings and ends of lines. Carver uses enjambed lines, with alliterated groupings of words at the beginnings and ends of lines, creating a gliding effect, as stressed sounds spill over from line to line:

When he came to my house months ago to measure
 my walls for bookcases, Jim Sears didn't look like a man
 who'd lose his only child to the high waters
 of the Elwha River. He was bushy-haired, confident,
 cracking his knuckles, alive with energy, as we
 discussed tiers, and brackets, and this oak stain
 compared to that.

The enjambed lines cause this poem to scan as prose, but the alliteration suggests a careful selection and placement of sounds. The alliteration in the first four lines—the repetition of the initial "m" sound in the first line that spills over into the first word of the second line, followed by the repeated initial "l" sound at the

end of the second and beginning of the third line, followed by the pairing of “waters” at the end of line three with “Elwha” at the beginning of line four, and “confident” at the end of line four with “cracking” at the beginning of line five—sets up a pattern that comes and goes throughout the poem, pacing it, creating moments of hesitation, followed by resolution. “Lemonade” certainly tends toward the prosaic side of Carver’s body of poetry, but it clearly employs a poetic technique that sets it apart from his prose.

In her article “Four More Priamels in the Poetry of Raymond Carver,” Sandra Lee Kleppe argues that critics have focused too intently on the connection between Carver’s prose and poetry, causing them to undervalue his poems. She argues that Carver’s poetry is not predominantly narrative, conceding that his body of work is “dotted with narrative poems” (62), but points out that Carver “was a consistent practitioner” (62) of lyric poetry, citing “This Word Love” (235) as an example. Kleppe highlights other traditional and modern poetic forms Carver used that she feels have been overlooked, such as the aubade “A Poem Not Against Songbirds” (133-4) and the dramatic monologue “You Don’t Know What Love Is” (16-20), but the main focus of her argument is to shed light on Carver’s use of the priamel, as in “My Crow” (103), “Fear” (60), “The Car” (151-2) and “Woolworth’s 1954” (53-4).

Kleppe sees great significance in Carver’s use of the priamel, because it demonstrates the way in which Carver appropriated traditional poetic forms, mixed “the traditional with the contemporary”, and adapted older poetic forms for new purposes (63-4). Just as Kleppe expounded on William H. Race’s original

article, “Some Visual Priamels from Sappho to Richard Wilbur and Raymond Carver” which identified Carver’s “Wes Hardin, From a Photograph” as a priamel, I wish to expand on Kleppe’s article to identify one more priamel written by Raymond Carver, “Sleeping” (190), and a second poem that uses priamelic elements for dramatic effect, “In the Lobby of the Hotel del Mayo” (184-5).

Kleppe and Race describe the priamel poem as presenting a quantity or diversity of items within a specific context or category that hinges on a pivotal word or line near the end of the poem which then presents a surprise climax, and reveals the true subject of the poem (Kleppe 64; Race 3). Kleppe shows that several of Carver’s priamels—“Fear,” “The Car”—employ catalog verse to present the reader with a series of paradoxical statements which then culminate in a surprise twist at the end. She argues that by employing catalog verse in his priamels, Carver is renewing an ancient tradition that was “revolutionized by Whitman to fit the American idiom” (65), and giving his poems a “strong sense of closure” without “over-determining the meaning of the climax of the poem” (65). Much like “Fear” and “The Car,” “Sleeping” combines catalog verse with the priamel in order to add focus to the variety of related ideas. The general category of the poem is introduced in the title—“Sleeping”—as the poem goes on to list all the various places in which “he” has slept:

He slept on his hands.

On a rock.

On his feet.

On someone else's feet.

He slept on buses, trains, in airplanes. 5

Slept on duty.

Slept beside the road.

Slept on a sack of apples.

He slept in a pay toilet.

In a hayloft. 10

In the Super Dome.

Slept in a Jaguar, and in the back of a pickup.

Slept in theaters.

In jail.

On Boats. 15

He slept in line shacks and, once, in a castle.

Slept in the rain.

In Blistering sun he slept.

On horseback.

He slept in chairs, churches, in fancy hotels. 20

He slept under strange roofs all his life.

Because the poem appears to follow a single character through a variety of different situations, it resembles a poetic biography of the unnamed character, and it shows the great heights and depths which have characterized his life. The highs are directly contrasted with the lows, such as in line 12, when the luxury and high status of a Jaguar is contrasted with the commonplace and generic pickup truck.

Again, in line 16, the lowest of human dwellings—the shack—is contrasted against the most elevated—the castle. In addition to giving the poem a mysterious quality (what was responsible for these swings of fortune?), these contrasts give the poem a strong sense of movement, from high to low, from low to high. The inclusion of different forms of transportation throughout the poem—“feet” (line 3); “buses,” “trains” and “airplanes” (line 5); “the road” (line 7); cars and trucks (line 12); “boats” (line 15); and “horseback” (line 19)—add to this sense of movement, and create an overarching contrast between the static imagery of a man sleeping with that of constant motion.

The pivotal point in the poem comes in line 22, when the word “now” shifts the perspective from past to present, bringing the variety into focus: “Now he sleeps under the earth. / Sleeps on and on. / Like an old king.” The numerous different scenes of sleeping are presented as foils to the ultimate scene of sleeping—death. Line 22 reveals the true subject of the poem, which is not a sleeping man at all, but a dead one. Ironically, because the poem carries such a strong sense of movement throughout, even though the man in the poem has been asleep for the entire poem, he does not get a chance to rest until the very end, when he is laid to rest “under the earth.” It is this surprise twist at line 22 which sets this poem apart from simply being a poem of catalog verse, and transforms it into a priamel.

One more poem, that, while not exactly a priamel, appears to have been influenced by Carver’s exposure to the device is “In the Lobby of the Hotel del

Mayo” (184-5). The poem employs a form of catalog verse, and again uses repeated phrasing at the beginnings of lines to create a sense of unified variety:

The girl in the lobby reading a leather-bound book.

The man in the lobby using a broom.

The boy in the lobby watering plants.

The desk clerk looking at his nails.

The woman in the lobby writing a letter.

The old man in the lobby sleeping in his chair.

The fan in the lobby revolving slowly overhead.

One major difference between this poem and some of Carver’s other priamelic poems is that this catalog of elements is in no way contradictory or paradoxical. This poem is more like a narrative poem in that the catalog verse simply creates a scene and catalogs the action. What comes next however does seem to borrow from the priamelic tradition of surprises, except this one comes too early to be considered a surprise ending. An unspoken change has occurred, but the reader is aware of it only through the reactions of the people in the lobby. In the second stanza, Carver re-catalogs the characters from the first, each of them reacting to this mysterious change in the scene—“The man leans on his broom and looks. / The boy stops in his tracks. / The desk clerk raises his eyes and stares.”

In Carver’s other priamel poems, the turning point at the end provides a strong sense of closure. “In the Lobby of the Hotel del Mayo” has no sense of closure at all:

It’s clear something terrible has happened.

The man is running straight for the hotel.

His lips are working themselves into a scream.

Everyone in the lobby will recall their terror.

Everyone will remember this moment for the rest of their lives.

The poem ends mysteriously, in future tense, just before the man running up the hill is able to scream. However, the shift in pronoun—from cataloging each character individually in the first two stanzas, to the inclusive “everyone” in the final two lines—unifies the variety of the first two stanzas and creates a new variation on the priamel, one which invites imagination rather than framing the reader’s interpretation.

Carver’s experimentation with this ancient poetic form can be easy to overlook, but the poetic element that is perhaps the most difficult to overlook is the lineation of Carver’s poems. Even in the simplest of cases, the fact that Carver’s poetic texts are broken up into lines and stanzas makes them *look* like poems. In fact, making his poetry look right was one of the major concerns of Carver the poet. In response to a question about the lineation and presentation of his poetry, Carver said that he works “considerably hard in making it attractive—making it look ‘right’ to the eye, and hoping it’ll be right to the ear as well. [He’ll] work with it on the page well after it’s been finished. But other times, just the content alone will dictate how it looks on the page” (Gentry 224).

In an interview conducted late in his career, in 1986, Carver claimed that things like “stanzas, numbers of syllables, lines per stanza” were not of any interest to him (Gentry 191, Bethea 187), but went on to say that what was

important to him was “that the poems be lively and look lively” (Gentry 191). It is curious that Carver made this comment so late in his career, because in looking at Carver’s collected poems, it appears that it is his earliest poetry—that of *Fires*—which is the most “lively” on the page, and that his later poetry is largely devoid of stanza breaks and varied line lengths, moving away from some of the novel alignments that he experimented with in his early years. In fact, it appears that in general, Carver’s line length increased over the course of his career, with many of the poems in *A New Path to the Waterfall* resembling passages of prose more than poems, perhaps suggesting a blurring of prose and poetry that progressed in line with the dominant trend in American poetry in general during the twentieth century.

There are several poems in *Fires* which use variations on the same lineation pattern, each one zig-zagging or winding its way down the page, presenting a highly visual product. One of them, “Poem for Hemingway & W.C. Williams” (40) uses the lineation pattern to create a sense of contrast, and to capture the back-and-forth of a discussion. The poem follows a consistent zig-zag pattern of lineation with short lines, every other of which is indented five spaces:

3 fat trout hang
 in the still pool
 below the new
 steel bridge.
 two friends
 come slowly up

the track

For this poem, the lineation carries multifold interpretations. The trickle of words down the page visually mirrors the stream in the poem, and it also brings to mind the image of a trout, swaying back and forth as it holds steady in the current of a stream. A third function of the lineation is to visually represent the multiple dichotomies in the poem—beginning with the two different writers identified in the title. The two friends in the poem appear to be versions of the two writers to whom the poem is dedicated, one being an “ex-heavyweight” (the heavysset, uber-masculine Hemingway) and the other a “medical man” (the physician-poet William Carlos Williams). The reference to the “ex-heavyweight” comes in a left-justified line, while the reference to the “medical man” comes in an indented line, drawing attention to their dichotomous relationship. This pattern is noticeable across the entire poem, as words in the indented lines often foil words in the left-justified lines—“new” (line 3) on the left and “old” (line 10) on the right, “below” (line 3) on the left and “up” (line 6) on the right, “two” (line 5) on the left and “one” (line 8) on the right, “clear” (line 23) on the left and “fading” (line 28) on the right. This lineation pattern represents the two different positions in the discussion between the friends, and also draws attention to the contrasting images. The short, staggered lines create a halting effect, actually slowing the reader down, adding another layer to the poetic experience by imitating the slow, leisurely pace of a walk through the woods.

Another poem that uses very short lines indented at varying intervals to create a visual effect is “The News Carried to Macedonia” (24-5), a poem that snakes down the pages, visually echoing the recurring river images in the poem:

On the banks of the
 river they call Indus today
 we observe a kind of
 bean
 much like the Egyptian bean
 also
 crocodiles are reported
 upstream & hillsides grown over
 with myrrh & ivy
 He believes
 we have located the headwaters
 of the River Nile

The poem lacks any punctuation marks, further adding to the flowing quality of the text and adding a third layer to the river-image. While traditional poetic elements such as rhyme, rhythm and meter are absent from this poem, Carver uses lineation and punctuation to create a multifaceted image of a river, carrying the poem along, just as the Indus River has carried the troops in the poem to their current position. Arthur Bethea offers a different reading of the lineation of this poem, arguing that the “jumbled visual effect” of the lineation parallels the

“roughness of life in a marching army” (188), but in either case, an analysis of the lineation of the poem is vital to an analysis of the poem.

Critics who have accused Carver of not being a poet seem to be convinced that Carver’s poetry is simply prose or narrative packaged as poetry, but Carver’s demonstrated use and reinvention of the traditional priamel form, as well as his use of lineation for symbolic and visual effect are two examples of the sorts of poetic devices that set his poetry apart from his prose. Many of Carver’s poems exist somewhere in the middle of the continuum between prose and poetry, lacking many of the elements that are associated with poetry, but employing strategic word choices, sound combinations and careful presentations beyond what is usually expected of prose.

III. Alcoholism and the Poetry of Raymond Carver

Raymond Carver is one of a very few American writers who were alcoholic but managed to beat the disease and finish their careers sober. His alcoholism was a driving factor in determining the course of his career, and it shows up in almost all of his work. Carver wrote both poetry and prose, but due to a variety of factors, the bulk of his poetry was written in the 1980's, after his battle with alcoholism and very near to the end of his life. Because of this, his poetry deals with alcoholism in a more reflective manner than his prose. Carver did not write autobiography, but he says that all of his stories and poems have a point of reference to his real life, some more so than others. By examining the relationship between his alcoholism and his poetry both in the context of the larger patterns of his writing and within the lines of his poems, one gains a better understanding of the relationship that Carver had with alcohol, and how it affected his writing.

Carver's alcoholism first began to show itself sometime around 1967, during a period in his life when he felt that his responsibilities—being a husband and a father—were forcing him to work odd jobs just to pay the bills, leaving almost no time for him to write (Gentry 74-5, Meyer 7, *Fires* 193). Carver was working as a custodian at Mercy Hospital in Sacramento, while living with his wife, Maryann, and their two children. Carver had been managing to balance his role as a father and a husband with his aspiring career as a writer, and in fact had already written several of the stories which would later appear in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, but after a certain point, he began to lose faith that his hard

work would ever be rewarded, and he took refuge in the bottle. He later went so far as to claim that “full time drinking became [his] life’s ambition” (Gentry 75).

Over the next ten years, Carver’s drinking would grow steadily worse, culminating in four separate hospitalizations for acute alcoholism between October 1976 and January of 1977 (*All Of Us* 373). This decade in Carver’s life has come to be known as the “bad Raymond years,” for Carver’s incessant drunkenness, and his reckless, at times even horrifying behavior. Maryann links the start of Carver’s heavy drinking to his first teaching job at the University of California in Santa Cruz, saying that prior to teaching he only drank socially (Halpert, 73), but a variety of other factors such as financial problems—the Carvers had to file for bankruptcy in 1967 (*All of Us* 372)—and frustration with married life seem to have contributed to his unhealthy behavior.

Raymond and Maryann were struggling to support their family, working any and all jobs that came their way. At one time, Carver was actually working at both UC Santa Cruz and the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, commuting between the two without either school knowing about it (Halpert, 17). According to Leonard Michaels, Carver had convinced United Airlines to let him fly for free in exchange for writing them in to one of his stories, a bargain which Carver never upheld (Halpert, 21). At another time, Carver was teaching courses at UC Berkeley while simultaneously holding a Wallace Stegner writing fellowship at Stanford, which was a violation of the rules, but Raymond and Maryann were simply doing anything they could to cling to a source of income for their family. Unfortunately, due in no small part to Carver’s alcoholism, they were unable to

hold any one job down for very long and had to file for their second bankruptcy in 1974 (*All Of Us* 373).

Carver's drinking aggravated his family's financial troubles, and likewise, his financial troubles only fueled his heavy drinking. Carver also expressed frustration at not being discovered or appreciated as a writer, and this frustration built as the years passed and still no one wanted to publish *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. Carver's desire for validation of his writing started early, claiming that the first story he ever had published, "Pastoral," which was published while he was an undergraduate at Humboldt State, "gave some much-needed validation" to his life (Gentry, 36). Carver had a history of being snubbed by the Iowa Writer's Workshop, starting when he was a poetry student there in 1964. Carver had finished his A.B. degree at Humboldt State, and had enrolled in a masters program in Iowa, but somehow managed to escape being noticed by the faculty there. Maryann took it upon herself to draw some attention to Ray, so one day she gathered up all of his manuscripts and marched down to the director's office to fight for her husband. Her stunt actually worked, and the workshop offered Carver a stipend for his second year, but it wasn't enough and the Carvers decided to move back to California anyway (Halpert, 65-66). Later, Carver sent the manuscripts for *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* in to the Iowa Short Fiction Contest, but failed to win the prize two years in a row despite the support of some of the faculty. As sort of a consolation prize, Carver was offered the teaching job there in 1973 (Halpert 9-11). Carver's continual frustration at his lack of

recognition demoralized him immensely and caused him to lose focus on his writing as his sober hours became fewer and fewer.

The literary environment in which Carver was immersed did nothing to help his addiction to alcohol. His time spent in Iowa City at the Iowa Writer's Workshop resulted in a friendship with John Cheever which revolved entirely around drinking. The two of them lived in the same hotel, Carver on the fourth floor, Cheever on the second, and Carver claims that the two of them "did nothing *but* drink" and that neither of them took the cover off of their typewriter once the whole time they were there (Gentry 40). But it wasn't only Cheever who shared Carver's taste for liquor. Many of the contemporary writers, colleagues and even students of Carver's joined him in his drinking binges. John Legget recalls once when Carver was invited to give a reading at the Iowa Workshop (years after his stint as a lecturer there). Carver arrived several days prior to his scheduled reading and Legget described the reaction from former students and drinking buddies as a "festival," with everyone coming out in full force to drink with Ray. By the morning of the lecture, Carver could hardly stand on his own, and his voice was completely inaudible. Despite all this, Carver gave the reading to an overwhelming response (Halpert, 13).

The culture of drinking among the literary figures in Iowa City and San Francisco in the late sixties and early seventies validated Carver's identity as both a writer and a drinker. Douglas Unger talks of the holiday parties that were held at the Carver's apartment in San Francisco or at Chuck Kinder's apartment which featured a veritable who's who of the American West writers' scene, and of

course lots and lots of drinking. The parties could last for weeks, and Carver would be leading the way, waking everyone up in the morning for a “heart starter” drink to start the day off (Halpert, 28).

A poem that gives the reader an idea of what these parties in San Francisco were like is the poem “Union Street: San Francisco, Summer 1975” (153-4) from *Ultramarine*:

In those days we were going places. But that Sunday
afternoon we were becalmed. Sitting around a table,
drinking and swapping stories. A party that'd been
going on, and off, since Friday a year ago.

Then Guy's wife was dropped off in front of the apartment
by her boyfriend, and came upstairs.

It's Guy's birthday, after all, give or take a day.

The description of the party as having “been / going on, and off, since Friday a year ago” makes it clear how these parties unfolded, carrying on and on, with people coming and going, more of a lifestyle than a party, and the poem indicates several traits characteristic of the people who lived this lifestyle. First of all, it shows how the socialization revolved around drinking. The poem begins with a group of people sitting around a table drinking, and ends the same way. The speaker even refers to the people as “all those alcoholics,” and mentions that he can't remember all the details of the conversation because he was drunk. The fact that Guy's wife is dropped off at the house by her “boyfriend” is a sign of how marriages were viewed at the time, at least by this particular group. Maryann

Carver talks about the women's liberation movement flowering during this period, and women and men alike losing their respect for the institution of marriage, saying "another wife, another life" (Halpert 75). This poem also shows how the problems in Guy and his wife's relationship are aired out for everyone else to see. They have to discuss their marital issues of infidelity in front of the whole party. Even during their most intimate moment, when, "thinking everyone had gone out for hamburgers, / she blew him in front of the TV," the speaker is watching—and even interrupts them. The closing line of the poem—"the world had gone from afternoon to night"—suggests despair, or regret over the deteriorating effect that this sort of lifestyle—heavy drinking, contempt for the nuclear family and a complete lack of privacy—can have on a married couple.

Carver did not like to write while directly under the influence of alcohol, claiming that he "never wrote so much as a line that was worth a nickel when [he] was under the influence" (Dardis 44), and when he was asked if alcohol ever served as an inspiration for his writing he answered vehemently in the negative, saying "my God, no! I hope I've made that clear" (Gentry 39). Nonetheless, alcohol plays an undeniable role in the fiction for which he became so well known. The stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) were written during the years when his alcoholism was taking hold on his marriage and his life, and it shows through in the stories. Carver was not writing autobiography, but there is almost always an element which can be traced back to his real life—in Carver's own words "a little autobiography and a lot of imagination."

Carver wrote most of *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (1981) in the years immediately after he stopped drinking, but even though he was sober, there was a great deal of uncertainty as to how long he would be able to remain that way. In the poem “Jean’s TV” (155), the speaker reflects this uncertainty, saying “my life’s on an even keel / these days. Though who’s to say / it’ll never waver again?” The “bad Raymond” years had left their mark on Carver, and it took him a long time to fully recover from the deep state of depression in which he found himself in 1976. This is likely responsible for the darkness and despair in many of the stories, although we now know that Gordon Lish played a large role in these stories as well. The stories in *Cathedral* (1984), written squarely during his sober years, are not rooted in his alcoholic experiences the way the first two collections are, and some stories exhibit a marked sense of hopefulness, but others draw on his alcoholism thematically with characters fighting the demons of their past and struggling to stay sober. Just as Carver’s tendency to write fiction seemed to depend at least in part on his alcoholism, his tendency to write poetry seemed to follow the more sober, healthier periods of his life.

In his book *The Thirsty Muse: Alcohol and the American Writer*, Tom Dardis identifies Raymond Carver as among the major American writers of the twentieth century who have been alcoholic. He lists twenty-eight other American authors who have been afflicted by the disease, arguing that American writers, more so than any other nationality, have a propensity for the disease (3-5). Dardis argues that even though some writers, such as William Faulkner and Ernest

Hemingway, believed that alcohol could benefit their writing and their careers, alcoholism is actually responsible for bringing early demises to the creative careers of nearly all the major American writers of the twentieth century (5-6).

Donald Goodwin, in his book *Alcohol and the Writer*, asserts that a third to half of all American writers were alcoholic during the twentieth century (172), a rate which is much higher than for the general population (2-6). As evidence he cites the statistic that excluding bartenders, authors die from cirrhosis of the liver more than any other group (2), and names forty-eight American writers who were alcoholic “off the top of the head” (4).

Carver has spoken out on the hypothesis that American writers have an unusually high rate of alcoholism and he has made his opinion clear:

I think alcoholism is probably no higher amongst writers or artists of any sort than it is amongst people of any other professional group, be they lawyers or doctors or ophthalmologists. There’s a myth that goes along with writing and alcohol. But purely and simply, drinking is not conducive to artistic production. Quite the contrary, I think it’s a disaster and a terrible hindrance. Writers are more visible than the other people, that’s all (Gentry 55).

Regardless of whether or not the connection between American authors and alcoholism has been mythologized in popular opinion, Carver and Dardis both highlight the disastrous effect that it has on writing and creativity. Carver even suggests that he felt his own creativity, or at least his energy declining, saying “you can mentally and physically feel it begin to flag as you start closing on 40,

after you've damaged yourself this way and that for whatever reasons, necessary or imagined" (Gentry 6). One of Carver's poems, "The Young Fire Eaters of Mexico City" (176), from *Ultramarine*, adds further complexity to Carver's feelings on this issue.

The poem tells of fire eaters in Mexico City, boys who blow mouthfuls of alcohol over lighted candles to create the illusion of eating fire in hopes of earning a few pesos from people on the street:

They fill their mouths with alcohol
and blow it over a lighted candle
at traffic signs. Anyplace, really,
where cars line up and the drivers
are angry and frustrated and looking
for distraction—there you'll find
the young fire eaters. Doing what they do
for a few pesos. If they're lucky.

There are numerous parallels between the fire eaters, and alcoholic authors. The fire eaters are dependent on an audience, somebody noticing them, just like authors, a fact Carver knows all too well after his struggle to publish *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. The fire eaters also have a dependence on alcohol, because it is what they use to create their illusion of breathing fire. However, the fire eaters' dependence on alcohol is also the cause for their loss of voice. After one year, "their lips / are scorched and their throats raw," and "they can't talk or cry out." This connection between alcohol and loss of voice is analogous to what

Carver describes as a “disaster,” with one obvious difference—the fire eaters could never do what they do in the first place if it were not for the alcohol. The alcohol enables the fire eaters to perform, but it puts a finite limit on their career—their name in Spanish translates to “a thousand uses.” The fire eaters start the countdown to their eventual muteness when they first pick up a beer can filled with alcohol and light their candle. This may have been the case for so many American writers, who, once they became immersed in the literary culture that accepted and even encouraged heavy drinking, took up beer cans of their own and rode their talent until it gave out.

Dardis points out another trend, namely that a large percentage of the most significant American writers who were *not* alcoholic were poets (6). Dardis does not develop this correlation beyond simply noticing it, but it can cast Carver’s career in a new light because he was both a poet and a fiction writer, and because the vast majority of Carver’s published poetry was written during his sober years, both very early on in his career, and near the end of his life. The first book Carver ever published was a collection of poems, *Near Klamath* (1960), written while he was still a student, and published by the English Club of Sacramento State College. His second published book—and his first regularly published volume, *Winter Insomnia* (1970)—was also a book of poems, but of the twenty-seven poems included in *Winter Insomnia*, twelve were duplicates of poems that had first been published in *Near Klamath*. Carver’s period of “increasingly heavy drinking” began in 1969 (*All of Us* 372), and therefore most of the poetry in *Near Klamath* and *Winter Insomnia* pre-dates what could be called the start of his

alcoholism. Carver did publish one volume of poetry during the heart of the “bad Raymond” years, *At Night the Salmon Move* in 1976, but of the twenty-three poems included, eight are recycled from *Winter Insomnia* and/or *Near Klamath*.

The rest of Carver’s published poetry came during what Carver called his “second life,” which started when he became sober and began his relationship with Tess Gallagher. This is when the bulk of Carver’s poetry was published, starting with *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* in 1985, which was followed closely by *Ultramarine* in 1986 and ended with *A New Path to the Waterfall* which was published posthumously in 1989. I find it interesting that his “second life” included a shift from fiction back to poetry. While there are a variety of factors which could determine whether Carver was writing poetry or prose during a given period in his life, I think it is worth noticing that his poetry output seemed to follow his sobriety much more so than did his fiction. Carver hints at a connection between the two, saying that he had intended to write fiction, but in the peace and quiet of Tess Gallagher’s Port Angeles home, poetry emerged from his pen (Gentry 103-4).

A side effect of this correlation between Carver’s drinking and his patterns of writing prose and poetry is that his poetry is often reflexive—Harold Schweizer claims that “Carver’s poetic tense is narrative retrospection” (127), while his fiction occurs in the present. In his fiction, the reader is almost always placed in the midst of the alcoholism and disfunctionality. The examples are many, and are visible in all three of his major collections of short stories. In “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” the main character finds out that his wife cheated on him years

ago, goes to the bar, gets drunk, gets mugged and spends the night sleeping on the street. In “Gazebo,” the narrator is cheating on his wife with a maid, and they have completely stopped doing their jobs as managers of a motel. In a strange attempt to work things out, the man and wife finish an entire bottle of scotch with predictable results. In “Where I’m Calling From,” the narrator is an alcoholic at a rehabilitation facility, trying to come to terms with his numerous relationship problems with his wife and his girlfriend.

In contrast to the fiction which often features alcoholic main characters, Carver’s poetry distances the reader from the alcoholism and disorder. One way Carver accomplishes this is by separating his past, alcoholic life from his “second life,” as though they were lived by two completely different people. The poem “The Windows of Summer Vacation Houses” (111-2), from *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water*, speaks directly to this idea of two separate lives. Immediately, from the title of the poem, a duality is suggested from the idea of a summer home. In many ways going to a summer home is like entering an alternate life, leaving your regular friends and neighbors, your job, and joining a different community where you can be a different person than is possible in your normal home. The speaker is enjoying a fishing trip on the Hood Canal in March, when they have the water to themselves. The speaker and his companions are sharing stories, of fishing, hunting game and “hunting” women. In the midst of this reminiscing, a light goes on in one of the summer vacation houses which they thought was empty. This action of a light going on triggers a more symbolic light going on in the speaker’s head (“And suddenly, like that—I remembered

Maryann”) but the speaker, who at this point we can assume is Carver himself, decides that it couldn’t be his own life that he is remembering:

...And I knew then those things that happened
so long ago must have happened, but not
to us. No, I don’t think people could go on living
if they had lived those things. It couldn’t
have been us.

The figure in the window seems representative of Carver’s past life, perhaps representing Carver himself, or his wife Maryann. As Carver reminisces about the past, the figure appears in a house they thought was empty as if to remind Carver that he was not alone in his past life.

During the height of Carver’s alcoholism, he sometimes did things which he later claimed to have no memory of. The speaker’s memory loss in the poem calls to mind Carver’s memory loss as an alcoholic. Chris Carver, Raymond’s daughter, tells a story about one time when she was at a restaurant in Santa Barbara with her parents, who were both drunk. Raymond started calling his daughter “horrible names” (Halpert, 85) out loud, prompting her to flee not only the restaurant, but town altogether, and head for her grandmother’s house in Mountain View, California. When her car broke down half way there, the police took her into custody and were able to track down her parents. The next morning when they went to pick her up, they couldn’t remember what had happened at the restaurant (Halpert, 86). In Chris Carver’s story it appears that her father’s lack of recollection of the event was due to his inebriated state, but in the poem, the

speaker is not exactly battling memory loss, but rather just cannot convince himself to believe that the memories in his head, because of how frightening they are, could possibly have happened to him.

The scene at the end of the poem draws further comparisons to an event that Carver struggled to remember or even comprehend, and provides some context for “those things” that Carver can’t believe he ever lived through:

This morning it was still dark
 when I made coffee. And found blood
 on the porcelain sides of the sink.
 More blood on the counter. A trail
 of it. Drops of blood on the bottom
 of the refrigerator where the fish
 lay wrapped and gutted.
 Everywhere this blood. Mingling with thoughts
 in my mind of the time we’d had—
 that dear young wife, and I.

Chuck Kinder remembers once when the Carvers had joined the Chuck and his wife Diane for drinks, during a period when both Maryann and Raymond had been unfaithful, but were back together for the time being. After they had been drinking quite heavily, Ray and Maryann got into an argument that stemmed from Maryann flirting with a Hawaiian gangster named Shorty Ramos. Their argument got very heated, and Ray actually hit Maryann in the side of the head with a bottle, shattering the bottle and cutting her neck quite badly. With blood pouring

all over her white dress, Diane Kinder rushed her to the emergency room to save her life. The next day, Ray couldn't remember having hit her with the bottle, and even years later, when reminded of the event he would say things like "who was that person who said he was me?" (Halpert 43-45).

At the end of the poem, when the speaker awakes to find blood splattered all over his kitchen, it is difficult not to think of this experience that nearly made Carver a murderer. Because the speaker is still waking up—it is dark out and he has not yet had his morning cup of coffee—he appears to be surprised to find the blood splattered around his kitchen, as though he hasn't quite remembered yet what went on last night until he follows the trail of blood to the wrapped, gutted fish in the refrigerator. The contrast of the red blood "on the porcelain sides of the sink" hearkens back to Maryann's bloodstained white dress, and Carver's disbelief at what he had done to her. By the end of the poem, the speaker has seemed to accept the reality of his memories, no longer identifying them as belonging to some other minor character in his life, but as "that dear young wife and I." It is not until the blood jogs his memory that the speaker accepts the fact that he really did live through some horrible experiences, and although they are just memories now, they still haunt him.

Another poem that hints at some of the unbelievable things that Carver put his family through is "From the East, Light" (168), from *Ultramarine*. Again, Carver distances himself from his alcoholic past, this time by shifting the point of view to third-person limited, from the point of view of his children. The poem presents itself as just a typical morning in the life of an alcoholic's children. On

one hand it is a typical morning. The children, after hearing their parents fight until late into the night, awake to find their father snoring on the couch, and “understand that the old way of life / has begun once more. So what else is new?” This casual dismissal of their parents’ dysfunctionality makes it clear that this is something that they are used to dealing with, although it may come and go. But this morning, there *is* something new—a “real shocker”—for the kids to deal with:

...their Christmas tree has been turned over.

It lies on its side in front of the fireplace.

The tree they helped decorate.

It’s wrecked now, icicles and candy canes

litter the rug. How’d a thing like this happen, anyway?

To make it worse, they see that their mother has given their father a length of rope for Christmas, apparently an invitation for him to hang himself. The children, upset as they may be, simply retreat into their own world with their cereal and the TV.

This poem is immediately followed in the collection by a similar poem, “A Tall Order,” written from the point of view of a housekeeper. Again, the poem shows a dysfunctional family from the point of view of one of the victims. In this poem it is not as explicit as to what is wrong with the family, but they are clearly not functioning in a healthy way:

This old woman who kept house for them,

she’d seen and heard the most amazing things.

Sights like plates and bottles flying.
An ashtray traveling like a missile
that hit the dog in the head.
Once she let herself in and found a huge
salad in the middle of the dining-room table.
It was sprinkled with moldy croutons.
The table was set for six, but nobody
had eaten. Dust filmed the cups and silver.

In the same way that the family in “From the East, Light” appears to have good periods and bad periods (they were able to hold it together long enough to get the Christmas tree decorated, but then the children “understand that the old way of life has begun once more”) the family in this poem also seem to be functional enough to prepare a large family dinner, but something interrupts it, and it remains untouched long enough for the croutons to go moldy. The housekeeper reacts in much the same way as the children in “From the East, Light,” by tuning out everything around her, and expecting the unexpected—an elephant coming out of the trees in the backyard.

These casual poetic representations of what sound like very traumatizing experiences come across in a very powerful way, perhaps because the reader gets the impression that there are many more stories just like these. While neither of these poems show clear evidence for autobiography, knowing Carver’s history, the reader can guess that he feels some association with the father, snoring on the couch in “From the East, Light,” and possibly with the poor man pleading not to

have his “hair pulled by the roots” in “A Tall Order.” By shifting the perspective away from the patriarch in the poems, Carver distances himself from the characters in the poem, but at the same time shows his familiarity with the situation. While Carver can seem hesitant to fully own up to his drunken behavior, these poems represent an attempt to see things from someone else’s point of view, and acknowledge the anguish that he was responsible for.

One poem which views the subject of alcohol in a much different light is “Extirpation” (121), from *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water*. The poem describes a scene of social drinking at a bar, perhaps in a hotel lounge. The speaker is talking with another man at the bar, “discussing the fate of the last caribou herd in the US.” The man calls for another round of drinks, but the speaker must leave, and they “never saw each other again.” Not only do they never see each other again, but the speaker goes as far as to say that they “never did anything worth getting excited about / for the rest of [their] lives.” I interpreted this poem as a sort of lament for the simple pleasures of casual drinking, something which Carver had to give up if he wanted to go on living. Carver said in an interview that after his fourth hospitalization in 1977, he came to the realization that he was “not going to be able to drink socially anymore” (Gentry, 55). Because Carver had to extirpate drinking from his life entirely, he had to give up the aspects of it that he enjoyed along with the aspects which almost killed him. In the poem, the act of drinking is not represented in a negative way at all, rather it is sort of glamorized (perhaps it is meant to be tongue-in-cheek) with the piano music in the background, and the deep intellectual

conversation about the dwindling caribou population. This poem hints at Carver's regret that he cannot enjoy the pleasures of healthy drinking any longer.

Early in his career, Raymond Carver struggled with issues of poverty, overwork, infidelity, pressure to fit in with the writer's scene and a lack of recognition. During this period, Carver was also alcoholic, but I believe his alcoholism was more of a symptom rather than the cause of all his woes. Later in his career, Carver was an affluent and acclaimed American writer in a loving, committed relationship. He was also sober, but it is unfair to identify sobriety as the sole cause of his turnaround. All of these factors combined to make the "bad Raymond" years so bad and his "second life" so much better by comparison. I am not attempting to reduce Carver's life and career to simple cause and effect relationships, but his writing appears to have responded to these dichotomies in his life. Because Carver's work was not always published promptly after he wrote it, it can be difficult to try to contextualize many of his pieces for which actual composition dates are unknown or unavailable, but it is fairly clear that it was not until Carver had resolved most of the issues that troubled him early in his career that he began writing poetry so fervently. Perhaps due to increased stability and security late in his life, Carver was able to be more personal and vulnerable in his writing. Carver's poetry has a more confessional quality than his short stories ever did, and although he used various techniques to put some distance between himself and his past, his regrets show themselves clearly in his final three collections of poems.

IV. Mortality in the Poetry of Raymond Carver

Carver's death in 1988 was both early and late—he was only fifty years old, but given his lifestyle for the better part of his existence, even he considered it an accomplishment to have lasted as long as he did. Carver was diagnosed with cancer of the lungs in 1987, and on October 1st had two-thirds of his left lung removed by doctors (*All of Us* 375). Unfortunately, by 1988 it was discovered that the cancer had spread to his brain and returned to what remained of his lungs (*All of Us* 375). The initial cancer diagnosis in 1987 and the subsequent battle with cancer resulted in several poems which are highly self-referential and address Carver's struggle to come to terms with his impending death. These late poems directly address Carver's mortality, and as a result have gotten a considerable amount of attention from critics studying Carver's attempt to come to terms with his death. However, by analyzing Carver's entire body of poetry, one can see that in fact Carver's diagnosis of terminal cancer may have simply brought a deep-seeded interest of his into the foreground of his work.

While the topics of cancer, death and mourning all show up very explicitly in Carver's late poetry, they also show themselves in Carver's earliest poetry, for example in "The Mailman as Cancer Patient" (39), which was first published in *Near Klamath* (1968), Carver's first published collection of poetry. This poem unintentionally foreshadows much of what was to come late in Carver's career. In it, a mailman has taken a leave of absence from his mail-carrying duties because of his illness—"he tires / easily, is losing weight"—and now he spends his time

“hanging around the house.” Perhaps due to his disease, or perhaps as a result of his newly found free time, the mailman finds himself doing a lot of thinking:

As he walks the empty rooms, he
 Thinks of crazy things
 Like Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey,
 Shaking hands with Franklin D. Roosevelt
 At Grand Coulee Dam,
 New Year’s Eve parties he liked best;
 Enough things to fill a book

The mailman’s reminiscence of past “crazy” experiences is not at all unlike what Carver the cancer patient spent much of his time doing. As evidenced by many of his later poems, Carver spent a lot of time remembering his past life in his final years, and he did indeed have enough to fill a book—three books in fact. At the time he wrote this poem, Carver was not yet thirty years old and had not lived much of what he would later reflect on as his “crazy” experiences, but appears to be able to anticipate that sort of late-life reminiscence already. The mailman, confined to his house, sometimes dreams that he “rises from his bed / puts on his clothes and goes / out, trembling with joy...” In her essay “Medical Humanism in the Poetry of Raymond Carver,” Sandra Lee Kleppe argues that the mailman hates those dreams because they make him feel that he has wasted his life (47), but I would argue that the reason the mailman hates those dreams so much is because they remind him of how limited his life has become, and all that remains are his memories. Carver on the other hand, stressed the point that he did not feel

regret at all in his final years, not for what he had or had not done and not for what he was no longer able to do.

Another of Carver's earliest poems, "Your Dog Dies" (6-7), in a way foreshadows Carver's later poetic habits. The title of the poem, written in second person narration and active present tense, also seems to serve as the first line, announcing that — "gets run over by a van." The speaker elaborates the unfolding scenario by saying "you feel bad personally, / but you feel bad for your daughter / because it was her pet / and she loved it so." The grief in the poem is not directed at the dog having died, but at the daughter having lost something she loved. This strikes a chord with Carver's own apparent grief at the end of his life, not so much for his impending death, but for those who he would leave behind. The speaker goes on to describe how the event inspires a poem, and the poem actually helps to assuage the grief felt over the loss:

you write a poem about it.
 you call it a poem for your daughter,
 about the dog getting run over by a van
 and how you looked after it,
 taking it out into the woods
 and buried it deep, deep,
 and that poem turns out so good
 you're almost glad the little dog
 was run over, or else you'd never
 have written that good poem.

This act of writing a poem about the death of the dog predicts Carver's later habit of writing poetry about his cancer diagnosis and imminent death. Although I am unaware of Carver ever explicitly referring to his writing as a source of energy or inspiration with respect to his illness, it appeared to help the dying Carver come to terms with his situation much like it helps the character in the poem to make something positive out of the death of the dog. The psychological concept of expressive writing therapy—focused expressive writing about traumatic or stressful events—is designed to help people sort through and identify their sources of stress. In “Your Dog Dies,” it is the aesthetic value of the poem written about the dead dog which helps the speaker forget about the grief he felt for the dog and for the daughter. Later in Carver's life, he seemed to appreciate writing about his battle with cancer for both of these reasons. He produced poetry of high literary quality of which he was rightfully proud, but I think writing also helped him through his final months, by sorting through his feelings and finding the humor in his situation.

In addition to “The Mailman as Cancer Patient” and “Your Dog Dies,” the motif of death appears several times in Carver's early poetry (although not nearly as frequently as it does in his later poems) and three poems in particular seem to hint at a fascination with the deaths of obscure historical figures. The three poems, “Hamid Ramouz (1818-1906),” “Poem for Karl Wallenda, Aerialist Supreme” and “Wes Hardin: From a Photograph” each describe the death of the figure for whom they are titled, with varying degrees of morbidity. “Hamid Ramouz (1818-1906)” (8) merely mentions that Hamid Ramouz “died by his own

hand, gunshot, at eighty-eight,” but the short poem ends with the speaker trying to “recall that strange life.” The last line suggests a sort of puzzling intimacy with a character whom he apparently knows very little about (the premise of the poem is that the speaker stumbled across a dictionary entry about him while looking up “Raleigh”), and perhaps indicates some shared trait or experience between the speaker and Ramouz. Carver did not commit suicide, but in many ways he was responsible for his own death, from the different abuses he inflicted on his body, cigarettes and alcohol in particular.

“Poem for Karl Wallenda, Aerialist Supreme” (46-7) is more of a poetic biography of the daredevil Karl Wallenda, whose circus troupe, The Flying Wallendas, were famous for their tightrope walking stunts (*The Flying Wallendas*). The poem, again written in second-person narration, is directed at Karl Wallenda, and the speaker follows Wallenda throughout his career and all over the world, mentioning some of the places in which he performed (Prague, Vienna, Nairobi, Florida, Puerto Rico). Also following Wallenda is the “wind”—“when you were little wind tailed you / all over Magdeburg” “Wind joined you as you stepped off the eaves of suburban houses / in Sarasota, Florida”—but the wind is not merely following Wallenda, rather it is almost stalking him, drawing him ever closer to his eventual death, and it appears Wallenda is conscious of this on some level:

You remarked on it all your life
 how it could come from nowhere,
 how it stirred the puffy faces of the hydrangeas

below hotel room balconies while you
 drew on your big Havana and watched
 the smoke stream south, always south,
 toward Puerto Rico and the Torrid Zone.

Wallenda was eventually blown off of his high-wire (some argue it was not the wind that made him fall, but “several misconnected guy ropes” [*The Flying Wallendas*]), which was stretched between two hotels in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The final eleven lines of the poem describe the fall which killed Wallenda, a culmination of the wind’s pursuit of him—perhaps it was more of a deadly courting—describing the wind as “throwing itself” into the arms of Wallenda “like a young lover.”

The poem comes across with a deep sense of wonderment on the part of the speaker, and by extension Carver. He seems enamored by Wallenda’s world travelling, and his encounters with world leaders such as the newly crowned emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie or the democratic King of the Belgians. He seems particularly in awe of the fact that a life that includes travel all over the world and performances for emperors and kings could be lived out on a wire suspended high above the ground—“imagine that: wire.” This poem was first published in *Fires* in 1983, and although an individual date of composition is unavailable, my understanding is that it was written much earlier than that—*Fires* collects his three earliest small-press collections and includes some never before published poems. If it was in fact written early in Carver’s career, the sense of wonderment that I refer to might be explained by Carver’s own early dreams of

living a worldly, literary lifestyle. Carver spoke of having dreamed, early on, of living the expatriate lifestyle in Europe, maybe in a villa on the Mediterranean. His dreams came true in 1968 when Maryann was offered a study-abroad scholarship to study in Tel Aviv, and the Carvers were promised the villa Ray had always dreamed of. However, the trip to Israel was a disaster and rather than it being the realization of Carver's dream, it marked the end of his idealized vision of life as a writer. "Poem for Karl Wallenda, Aerialist Supreme" may be a reflection of this early desire of Carvers, or even a resigned attempt to live out his dreams through his characters.

There is a strong sense of fate in the poem, as though Wallenda's eventual death was something he was moving towards his entire life. Read in the context of Carver's eventual death of lung cancer, it is worth noting the parallel between Wallenda's passion for death-defying stunts that eventually claimed his life, and Carver's addiction to cigarettes that led his health steadily "south," like the smoke from Wallenda's cigar, towards cancer and death.

A third of Carver's early poems which shows a marked interest into the deaths of obscure historical figures is "Wes Hardin: From a Photograph" (36-7). This poem is probably the most morbid of the three mentioned, and is a study of a photograph of a very dead Wes Hardin, "the outlaw." Wes Hardin, or John Wesley Hardin, committed his first murder at the age of fifteen, in 1868, and didn't look back, racking up a body count of over thirty, and living life on the lam. After a brief attempt at redemption during which Hardin studied law and was actually accepted to the bar, he was back to his old tricks, and in 1895, a fellow

gunman finally got the better of him, shooting Hardin down in the Acme Saloon (Williams). The photograph in the poem was apparently taken shortly after this incident, while Hardin is still lying on the floor of the saloon:

His head is turned at the camera
 and his face
 seems bruised, the hair
 jarred loose.
 A bullet has entered his skull
 from behind
 coming out a little hole
 over his right eye.

The poem goes on to casually describe “three shabby men / in overalls” who are posing with the dead man, one of them is wearing “what must be / the outlaw’s hat.” The text literally winds its way down the page, taking in the details of the picture just as the speaker’s eye catches them in the photograph. His eye dances across the picture, from the bullet holes in the corpse, to the three grinning gunmen, and back to the dead body, but what really catches the speaker’s gaze, in fact “makes [him] stare” is the bullet hole in Hardin’s right hand. The text graphically represents the speaker’s eye focusing on the hand by breaking up the zig-zag delineation of the poem and straying off to the right side rather than winding back to the left. The speaker’s focus on the “large dark bullethole / through the slender, delicate-looking / right hand” reduces the frame of reference to such a small window that the larger issues of life, death and murder become

pushed aside. By focusing on the hand, the speaker simultaneously dehumanizes the dead outlaw—by reducing him to a single feature—and emphasizes his ultimate humanity—by highlighting the fragility of the hand that killed more than thirty men.

The first lines of “Wes Hardin: From a Photograph” indicate that the poem was inspired by a photograph—“Turning through a collection / of old photographs / I come to a picture of the outlaw, / Wes Hardin, dead.” However, there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that the poem may have actually been inspired by something else. The poem was first published in *Near Klamath* in 1968, the year after Bob Dylan released his album *John Wesley Harding*, which included a song by the same title. Dylan’s song provides a brief biography of the Texas outlaw, and while it does not include any mention of Hardin’s death, there are parallels between the song and Carver’s poem. The first lines of the song—“John Wesley Harding was a friend to the poor”—strike a chord with Carver’s proclamation that he was a “paid-in-full member of the working poor” (Gentry xii), and could have easily piqued Carver’s interest in the outlaw. Dylan’s song also pays particularly close attention to Hardin’s hands, rhyming on the word “hand” twice in a short song that only contains six rhymed pairs. Carver makes no mention of Dylan in any interviews or essays, but Carver was not immune to the popular culture of the time, and it appears that this may be one example of contemporary music influencing poetry.

These early poems show that Carver was utterly aware of his mortality long before it was ever staring him in the face. While these are only several of

many poems he wrote early on in his career, they do show that death was a subject that the young Carver gave some serious thought to. I would stop short of saying that he had an obsession with death, but he does seem to have a slightly morbid sense of curiosity that continues to show itself from time to time in his later poetry and fiction. Carver did not write much poetry in the middle portion of his career, when his alcoholism was at its worst, and so after his three early collections *Near Klamath*, *Winter Insomnia*, and *At Night the Salmon Move*, he didn't publish another major collection of original poetry until *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* in 1985, when his health was already in decline. Because of this pattern, some of these poems are the only work written by a healthy Carver, and therefore show that it was not simply Carver's declining health that led him to write poetry about his anticipation of his own death. Rather, Carver had an innate interest in death and the final moments of life.

In January of 1984, Carver left his home in Syracuse, New York and went to stay in Tess Gallagher's Port Angeles, Washington home by himself in an effort to find some peace and quiet so that he could write. He had every intention of writing fiction, and in fact had not written a single poem in "over two years" (Gentry 178). However, something about the "sky house" in Port Angeles, or the timing in his career, or some other combination of factors led Carver to write poetry, and over the next sixty-five days, he wrote steadily, sometimes up to four poems a day, to produce *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* (Gentry 178). By September he had started writing poetry once again and by March of 1985 he had completed the poetry of *Ultramarine* (Gentry 179).

The poetry of *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* and *Ultramarine*, written in such a short period, is different from Carver's earlier poetry in that by 1984, he had stopped drinking and been sober for nearly seven years. Because of this, his life was much more stable, and combined with the solitude of his residence in Port Angeles, the environment in which *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* and *Ultramarine* were written could not have been more opposite from the chaotic, dysfunctional mess that produced his first three collections. There is no biographical evidence to suggest that Carver's health was faltering at this point, or if it was, Carver was not yet aware of any health problems. He was only forty-six years old, and although he had put his body through quite a bit, he had no immediate reason to fear his death. Much of his poetry reflects this, and several times explicitly states that he believed he had a considerable amount of life left to live. On the other hand, certain poems suggest that on a certain level, he may have felt his life drawing to a close.

The poem "Fear" (60) is one of the priamel poems that Kleppe addressed in her article "Four More Priamels in the Poetry of Raymond Carver." In it, the speaker catalogs a run-down of his various fears, and at first it has a comical air to it—"Fear of falling asleep at night. / Fear of not falling asleep" "Fear of anxiety!"—but it is also peppered with what appear to be serious fears—"Fear of having to identify the body of a dead friend." "Fear [my children] will die before I do, and I'll feel guilty." Kleppe argues that it is this line that represents the pivotal shift in the priamel, indicated by the interruption of the repetition of "Fear of..." with "Fear they..." (Kleppe 67). After this line, the speaker reveals the true item

of interest in the poem, death, concluding with the final four lines: “Fear of death.
/ Fear of living too long. / Fear of death. / I’ve said that.”

In this poem, the speaker seems to embody both the idea that he still has years and years ahead of him (evidenced by the fear of outliving their children, or of living too long) and the idea that his days might be numbered—the repetition of “fear of death” at the end of the poem gives it an ominous quality. Perhaps these two fears are not mutually exclusive, and they simply reflect the fact that no one can predict the future. Death is not always expected or unexpected, and perhaps this is what frightens the speaker the most. Another poem, “Blood” (105), also from *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water*, suggests that something in Carver’s life brought the possibility of death to the forefront of his consciousness. The poem is a recollection of an incident that happened years ago (“I was young at the time”) at a craps table. As the man next to the speaker prepares to throw the dice, “bright blood rushed / from his nose,” causing him to drop the dice in shock:

And then terrified as blood
ran down his shirt. God,
what’s happening to me?
he cried. Took hold of my arm.
I heard Death’s engines turning.
But I was young at the time,
and drunk, and wanted to play.
I didn’t have to listen.

So I walked away. Didn't turn back, ever,
 or find this in my head, until today.

While it would be wrong to assume that this poem describes an actual event, there are some parallels between this strange brush with death that was dismissed years ago and Carver's real life. The speaker, young, drunk and eager to gamble, can be read as a young Carver, before he stopped drinking, still somewhat unaware of the reality of what he was doing to his body, and the gambling can be read to represent the risks Carver was taking by drinking so heavily. It seems as though the speaker is just now recognizing that maybe he should have taken the stranger's sudden nose bleed a little more seriously, as it could have been a sort of cosmic warning sign for him. Line seventeen, "I heard Death's engines turning," shows just how strong a signal it was, but the speaker "didn't have to listen," and so he denied the gravity of the event—"until today." The final lines of the poem suggest that something triggered this memory to come floating up from the speaker's subconscious, but give no indication as to what. Perhaps something reminded him of the portentous sound of Death's engines, and, no longer feeling young and drunk, he paid closer attention this time.

A third poem from *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* which offers fairly strong evidence for the argument that Carver did not feel his health faltering at this point is "My Death" (122-3). While it seems slightly ironic for a poem entitled "My Death" to be used as evidence of good health, by directly confronting the topic of his own death, the speaker reveals some underlying expectations. The poem is a sort of wish list for what the speaker hopes his death

will be like, if he is lucky. The speaker describes how he hopes to have enough warning to get a chance to say goodbye to the people he loves. Near the end of the poem, it reads almost like a will, as though it weren't meant to be read until after the speaker had passed on. The most telling line is line thirty-three: "And remember I told you this a while ago—April 1984." I read this to mean that the speaker (and possibly Carver) expects to die "a while" after having written this poem. The term is fairly ambiguous, but my guess is that the four and a half years until Carver's death in August of 1988 was not the "while" that had been imagined.

Of course Carver did not know when his life was going to end. In retrospect, because *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* and *Ultramarine* were written so close to the end of his life, it is tempting to search the poems for clues, but as I have shown, the evidence points in both directions. He may have suspected that his lifespan would not set any records, but I don't think he realized the end was as close as it was. Regardless of how much longer he expected to live, Carver was interested in the experience of death. "Wes Hardin: From a Photograph" and "Poem for Karl Wallenda, Aerialist Supreme" indicated an early interest in people's final moments of life, and "My Death" shows Carver imagining several possible scenarios for his own final moments. The poem "Circulation" (143) describes a time when the speaker's arm fell asleep during the night. He and his partner wake up and "thumped it, squeezed it, and / prodded it back to life." Once the speaker's arm has returned to him, he cannot sleep, unable to stop thinking about "that one inescapable fact: even while / we

undertake this trip, / there's another, far more bizarre, / we still have to make.”

The speaker in “Blood” has a third-person brush with death that fails to sink in until years later. In this poem, the speaker’s own lifeless arm acts in a similar way to the man with the nosebleed in “Blood,” as a reminder of human mortality, and it appears to really hit home—the speaker lies awake for hours thinking about it. In “Blood,” the speaker simply walks away from the reminder and suppresses it, but the reminder in “Circulation” is attached directly to the speaker’s body. He must confront it, and does, recognizing it as an “inescapable fact.”

Two pieces Carver wrote around the same time as *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* and *Ultramarine* both indicate a continuing preoccupation with the end of life. Neither one of the two pieces, “Friendship” and “Errand,” are traditional Carver forms. “Friendship” is an essay about Carver’s friendship with Tobias Wolff and Richard Ford, and for some reason draws conspicuous attention to the fact that their friendship will not last forever because at some point, they will die. Carver compares friendship to marriage, as “something the participants have to believe in and put their faith in, trusting that it *will* go on forever,” but emphasizes the fact that it cannot. He reminds his reader that “people stop living,” and that “the only alternative to burying your friends is that they will have to bury you” (*Call If You Need Me* 118). In “Friendship,” referring to Wolff, Ford and himself in the third person, Carver claims that death is “never that far away from their thinking when they’re alone and not together and having fun” (*Call If You Need Me* 118). It seems that this was true of at least Carver.

“Errand” is considered a short story, the last Carver ever wrote, but is really more of a short biography of Anton Chekhov and up until the last few pages reads like nonfiction. Much like “Poem for Karl Wallenda, Aerialist Supreme,” it is a brief biography which focuses mainly on the scene of death. In “Errand,” Chekhov is dying of tuberculosis, and is receiving treatment, but Dr. Karl Ewald declares Chekhov “too far gone for help” (*Where I’m Calling From* 516). Despite the bitter prognosis, Chekhov remains optimistic until the very end, almost to the point of delusion. Carver describes Chekhov’s irrational optimism, saying “he was dying, it was as simple and unavoidable as that...he had to have known. Yet in one of the last letters he ever wrote he told his sister he was growing stronger by the day” (517). Although Carver recognized the futility in Chekhov’s words, he may have been inspired by his optimism. When Carver was dying of cancer, he spoke of his belief in miracles and renewal. In the introduction to *A New Path to the Waterfall*, Tess Gallagher says that it was impossible for Ray to accept death at age fifty, and that he retained the hope that “through some loop in fate,” he might be able to survive (*All of Us* 311). In Ray’s eyes, he had already cheated death once, so why rule out the possibility of a “third life.” Because of the thematic preoccupation with death, and because both “Errand” and “Friendship” were written so close to the end of Carver’s life, they are often assumed to have been written after his cancer diagnosis but were actually written prior to it, when Carver had no medical reason to be preparing himself for death (Halpert, 103-4). His diagnosis came shortly after writing these pieces, and the idea of death came sharply into focus.

After being diagnosed with lung cancer in 1987, Carver re-dedicated himself to writing poetry. With the help of Gallagher, Carver compiled his final collection of poems, *A New Path to the Waterfall*, full of musings on cancer and death. These poems, including “Gravy” (292) and “What the Doctor Said” (289) have gotten considerable attention from the critical community, particularly in reference to Carver’s feelings on mortality and death. It is important, however, to view them in light not only of Carver’s diagnosis of cancer, but also his demonstrated lifelong interest in death.

The poem “Proposal,” (290-1) revisits the idea of marriage, although it contrasts starkly with the mention of marriage in “Friendship,” as a “shared dream” that the participants trust will go on forever (*Call If You Need Me* 118). In “Proposal”—which was apparently inspired by Carver’s marriage to Gallagher in Reno, Nevada, after they received the terminal diagnosis—the marriage is taking place in spite of the fact that both participants *know* it can’t last forever, or even until the end of the year. “Proposal” returns to the craps table of “Blood,” but this time, instead of gambling with his own life and paying death no heed, the speaker has already lost his life and is desperately hoping for “one more chance.” Carver’s real wedding to Gallagher took place on June 17th, 1988, about six weeks before he died on August 2nd, suggesting that this poem was written sometime during the last six weeks of his life. Like Chekhov, Carver remained hopeful down to the very end.

One of the final poems which perhaps does the best job of encapsulating Carver’s feelings on death is “Wake Up” (287-9). In the poem, the speaker and

his partner are visiting a medieval dungeon in Zurich. The poem is filled with morbid descriptions of torture devices such as the Iron Maiden or the rack, but the most telling section of the poem is when the speaker see's the executioner's block:

I stare at the block. Why not? Why not indeed?
 Who hasn't ever wanted to stick his neck out without fear
 of consequence? Who hasn't wanted to lay his life on the line,
 then draw back at the last minute?
 Who, secretly, doesn't lust after every experience?

This desire to experience “every experience” could help to explain Carver’s interest in death, as it is the final experience anyone ever has. Jo Angela Edwins may be on to something when she argues that Carver “views dying as the ultimate act of living” (*New Paths* 13). At the end of the poem though, when the speaker’s partner goes through with their mock execution, they seem to gain a new respect for the act of dying, for even the pretend version unnerves them visibly.

Edwins opposes Graham Clarke’s claim that “death frames Carver’s world and suggests an underlying nothingness,” arguing that this conclusion disregards “the increased hopefulness apparent in his later fiction and much of his poetry” (*New Paths* 8), but Edwins also disregards an important segment of Carver’s poetry. Edwins argues that “Carver’s later poetry confronting his cancer diagnoses and his impending death proves noticeably less menacing than his earlier writings” (8). By focusing simply on Carver’s poetry on death and anticipation of death in *A New Path to the Waterfall*, Edwins fails to recognize

that Carver's diagnosis of cancer changed very little in his poetry. It certainly brought themes of death to the forefront, but these themes were always there, and as for a renewed sense of hopefulness, after beating his alcoholism, Carver believed that anything was possible.

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VI. Written Summary of Capstone Project

This project is an in-depth study of Raymond Carver's poetry. Raymond Carver was an American short story author and poet who lived from 1938 to 1988. Carver is generally considered to be one of the greatest American short story writers of the twentieth century, and is sometimes called the most influential American short story writer since Ernest Hemingway. Despite the fact that Carver has published just as much poetry as prose, he is still remembered almost exclusively for his short fiction. In recent years, Carver's poetry has begun to receive more critical attention, and this paper attempts to build on work by critics such as Arthur Bethea and Sandra Lee Kleppe by showing that not only is Carver's poetry worthy of critical attention for its technical merits, but it also plays a unique role in cataloging some of the important periods in Carver's life.

My paper is broken up into three sections, each focusing on a different aspect of Carver's poetry. The first section addresses the poetic merits of Carver's poetry. Certain critics have downplayed the significance of Carver's poetry, one, Fred Chappell, going as far as to claim that Carver wasn't even a poet. I defend Carver against such attacks by showing the ways in which Carver's poetry uses repetition of sounds, interesting lineation patterns and variations on traditional poetic forms to produce poetry that is innovative and worthy of attention in its own right. I acknowledge that Carver's poetry does tend towards the prosaic end of the spectrum, but show that it distinguishes itself from prose in several key ways.

The second section of the paper focuses on the ways in which alcohol and alcoholism is represented in Carver's poetry, and the ways in which the disease shaped Carver's career. Carver dealt with the effects of alcoholism from his late twenties through his late thirties, until he was hospitalized on four separate occasions during a four month span. Carver's alcoholism posed serious problems for his personal life—during one of many alcoholic binges, Carver slashed his wife Mary Ann's neck with a broken bottle, sending her to the hospital. It also caused problems for his career as a writer for he was unable to write while he was under the influence, and went through a long drought of productivity during the height of his alcoholism. Carver was able to quit drinking and spent the final ten years of his life a sober man. One interesting correlation between Carver's alcoholism and his poetry is that most of his poetry was written late in his career, after his recovery from alcoholism. As a result, his poetry deals with alcoholism from a different angle than his stories do, and this offers a new perspective into his battle with the disease.

The third section of my paper is dedicated to examining the ways in which mortality is dealt with in Carver's poetry. Carver died of cancer at the age of fifty, and his final volume of poetry, *A New Path to the Waterfall* was written after Carver was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Several critics, such as Jo Angela Edwins, have examined the poetry that Carver composed after his terminal diagnosis to determine what it can reveal about what Carver's perspective was when he was facing his own death, but, through an analysis of the ways in which death is represented over Carver's entire body of poetry, I show that his diagnosis

did little more than bring the theme of mortality in to focus for him. In fact, Carver wrote poems anticipating death all throughout the course of his career, and short of being obsessed with mortality, enjoyed meditating on the subject in general, regardless of his health.

My methods of analysis are fairly straightforward for literary criticism. I focus on primary sources—Carver’s collected poems—and perform close readings of some of the poems, dissecting them line-by-line in order to distill the poetic elements at work. I look at the ways in which his word choice, combinations of sounds, length of lines and visual presentations contribute to the overall effect of the poem and to the experience of reading. I also search for instances where Carver’s poems reference his real-life events, to determine what the poems can add to our knowledge of Carver’s life.

I also rely heavily on selected interviews with Carver and with his friends and family to establish a degree of biographical context to his work. There are two great volumes of interviews on Carver—*Conversations with Raymond Carver* edited by Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, which is a collection of interviews with Carver and *Raymond Carver: An Oral Biography* by Sam Halpert, which is a collection of interviews with Carver’s friends, colleagues and family members—which I cite heavily throughout my paper. These interviews are the closest thing there is to a biography on Carver, and were my main source of biographical information.

In addition to these sources, I rely on the work of established literary critics to help me find my place in the conversation on Carver. Although Carver’s

poetry has not been extensively studied or written on, there is a great deal of written criticism on Carver, which I waded through to find arguments that were relevant to my purposes. The books and articles that I read gave me ideas for how to frame my arguments, and helped me to avoid repeating past work. As I have said, there is a dearth of written material on Carver's poetry, but I am not the first to try to rectify this. Other critics have come before me, and rather than start from scratch, I tried to build upon their arguments.

This project is significant because it represents one of the most extensive studies of Carver's poetry that exists to my knowledge. Much of this paper is dedicated to biographical details and factual distinctions which can be found elsewhere, but this paper assembles a great deal of information with a unified theme. This project is also significant for the original arguments and analyses that I make throughout the course of my paper. Many critics address Carver's poems only in passing, and there are very few instances of individual poems being carefully and thoroughly analyzed in print. Furthermore, critics who have addressed Carver's poems often gravitate towards the same handful of poems. I analyze some poems that have not been addressed in print by other critics, and I hope I have shown that there are more poems worthy of attention if the reader is willing to provide it.