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WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT FRAGMENTATION:
DOING AWAY WITH UNITY IN RAYMOND CARVER'S SHORT FICTION

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The work presented in this MA thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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ABSTRACT

In this study I examine how the aesthetics of fragmentation dominating the fictional world of Raymond Carver's short story composite *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* mirrors the real world as a chaotic place hardly understandable when analyzed through the totalizing lens of coherence. Traditionally, criticism on Carver has virtually overlooked the key role fragmentation plays in as unique a genre as the short story composite. In fact, most analyses of Carver's oeuvre in general and this composite in particular are indebted to the universal tendency to unify that prevails in both literature and life, fiction and reality. While it is possible to identify some connective phenomena in this composite, unity is certainly not a significant feature when it comes to characterizing it as a whole. No matter how hard we try, there will always be more loose ends than points in common between the discrete stories that conform the composite. Thus, fragmentation, which is of equal importance to this genre, certainly stands out all the more in this case. Not only is it a reminder of the tension between the simultaneous openness and cohesion that is inherent to this narrative form, but it is also an effective strategy on the author's part in order to reflect the fragmented nature of the world to which we as readers belong.

KEY WORDS: Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Short Story Composite, Fragmentation, Openness, Multiplicity, Polyphony.

RESUMEN

En este estudio examino cómo la fragmentación que impera en el mundo fictivo creado por Raymond Carver en su cuentario *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* complementa la imagen que el autor ofrece en él del mundo real, un mundo difícilmente comprensible cuando lo analizamos a través de la lente unidimensional de la coherencia. Tradicionalmente el discurso crítico sobre Carver ha ignorado prácticamente por completo la importancia que la fragmentación tiene en este singular género narrativo. De hecho, la mayoría de los análisis de la obra de Carver en general y de ésta en particular están motivados por esa tendencia universal que nos lleva a buscar la unidad tanto en la literatura como en la vida, en la ficción y en la realidad. Aunque es posible identificar ciertos elementos de cohesión en este cuentario, la coherencia no es la característica que mejor lo define en su conjunto. Lo cierto es que no importa cuánto lo intentemos: siempre habrá más cabos sueltos que puntos en común entre los distintos relatos que componen la obra. Por lo tanto, la fragmentación, que es tan esencial como la unidad a la hora de caracterizar esta forma narrativa, es mucho más significativa en este caso. Con ella Carver no sólo consigue recordarnos la tensión que existe entre la simultánea indeterminación y coherencia inherente a este género narrativo, sino que también logra reflejar de una manera efectiva la naturaleza fragmentada del mundo al que nosotros mismos pertenecemos como lectores.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Raymond Carver, Cuentario, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Fragmentación, Indeterminación, Multiplicidad, Polifonía.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It's akin to style, what I'm talking about, but it isn't style alone. It is the writer's particular and unmistakable signature on everything he writes. It is his world and no other. This is one of the things that distinguishes one writer from another. Not talent. There's plenty of that around. But a writer who has some special way of looking at things and who gives artistic expression to that way of looking: that writer may be around for a time.

-Raymond Carver, "On Writing," 1981

Although Carver has received worldwide critical acclaim for his creative talent, little has been said about his "special way of looking at things" in relation to "his artistic expression," which is, as he anticipated, the principal contributing factor to his relevance as a writer to this day. Traditionally, most critical work on his oeuvre has been conceived as a pursuit of unifying elements that could support academics' general claim for coherence as the trait that best describes his fiction. Since "we are pattern-seekers, pattern-shifters, and our pleasure in these patterns is both dignified and fully human" (Downes 53), it is not surprising to see our everyday urge to order the world transposed to critical studies on literature. Not even Carver could escape it. Motivated by this universal compulsion to unify, many are the critics who have attempted to identify a major undercurrent that could help readers make sense of a work as convoluted as *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. While some connections are justifiable and even useful at times, I cannot help but feel that the majority of the studies on Carver in general (and, more importantly, on this book in particular) are too comprehensive. This does not imply, however, a denial on my part of the possibility of finding certain links between the stories in this composite.¹ To me, even if a certain degree of unity is likely to be found in it, the premise of all-round coherence that serves as a point of departure of most recent criticism is perhaps both unrealistic and counterproductive.

Driven by their ambition to connect all the stories so as to analyze the composite as a whole, most scholars have deprived each story of its worth as a separate entity.

¹ From now on, I will be referring to *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* as a "short story composite." I will dwell on the reasons why I have chosen this generic label over others that have appeared consistently in criticism on works of the same nature in the second section of my study.

Indeed, the majority of research on the topic tends to overlook the fact that the individual stories in a composite make sense both when taken together as a whole and individually (Lundén 52). In so doing, academics have often taken for granted not only their value as discrete stories, but also the greatness in those unbridgeable differences that set them apart. Nevertheless, since openness outweighs closure in the characterization of the short story composite as a genre (75), it is not far-fetched to say that this is also the case in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. There are, I realize, more loose ends, which cause the inevitable “*tension* between ‘the one and the many’” that is central to the form (20-21), than links between its seventeen stories. This tug-of-war between the role each individual story plays when read on its own and the role they play as a whole points to the fact that fragmentation carries a greater weight than coherence and unity.

Granted, the fragmented nature of Carver’s work is intrinsically indebted to the openness that characterizes the composite as a genre, but I think that it would be a mistake to assume that it is the only reason behind it. Committed as he was to “the exigencies of craft” (Scott 2), it is hard to imagine that Carver would bestow fragmentation such an important role in this work merely by chance. Not in vain did he say of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* that “it’s a much more self-conscious book in the sense of how intentional every move was, how calculated” (qtd. in Runyon 85). That fragmentation is so remarkable in this composite is no accident, then, especially bearing in mind how deliberate Carver’s changes were. Many of them had already been published in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and would be published again in 1983 in *Cathedral*,² however the stories we encounter in this composite are not only shorter in length, but also sparser in tone compared to both their earlier and later counterparts (85). The extent to which Carver himself was responsible for these drastic changes is still unclear—in fact, it has sometimes been argued that, based on how high Gordon Lish’s degree of involvement in the revisions of the stories was, his “role went beyond being a mere editor to being a collaborator” (Hemmingson 480). As heated a debate as it is, I will not scrutinize Lish’s edits or probe into this issue any further for what truly interests me is the resulting style of the composite regardless

² They would be republished again, this time in the original, expanded manuscript form in *Beginners* in 2009.

of who is to “blame” for it. With its deep, yet plain-spoken message, Carver’s prose in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* brings to light the austere style of his poetry. After all, “Raymond Carver, the most beloved short-story writer of our time, was first of all, in his own estimation, a poet” (Scott 3). I am not alone in thinking that there is a visible trace of Carver’s poetic style in his short fiction. As Scott observes, the “vernacular, off-the-cuff, unadorned style” (4) that characterizes his poems equally permeates his short stories, as evidenced by this composite in particular. More importantly, the style in which it is written, reminiscent of his poetry, reinforces the message Carver wants to convey in it by constricting “as if in obedience to his fiercer subject matter” (Nesset 31). In spite of its hardness, it cannot be denied that his style “subtly reveals depth, meaning and plot” (Champion 7). I am particularly drawn to how this dynamic is further strengthened by the features of the short story composite and the reasons why choosing this genre over other perhaps more rewarding options remains one of Carver’s best—if not the best—achievements. Indeed, it is Carver’s careful interweaving of form and content so as to dramatize his vision of the world that motivates this study in the first place. As he once said, “To write a novel, . . . a writer should be living in a world that makes sense, a world that the writer can believe in, . . . and then write about accurately,” but his “seemed to change gears and directions, along with its rules, every day” (qtd. in Lainsbury 5-6). In this light, that his chaotic view of the world found its ultimate expression in the short story composite seems hard to deny.

In this study, I will explore further the key notion of fragmentation in a composite that has normally been analyzed through the all-inclusive lens of coherence. In contrast to the bulk of pre-existing critical work on Carver where fragmentation has virtually been overlooked altogether, my argument is indebted to more recent studies, such as Nesset’s and Lundén’s, where the fragmentary structure of the genre has not only been accounted for but also highlighted and given the recognition it truly deserves. Being characterized not by the prominence of its closural devices but by its fragmentation, this composite becomes a mirror of the real world. Its fragmented form is not merely a circumstance imposed by the characteristics of the genre, but a conscious choice that is meant to provide the reader with an insight of the actual world outside the work of fiction. As Saltzman points out, “A ‘totalizing fiction’ which professes an integrated, even absolute, vision of reality is as antiquated as the myth of

the hieratic author that it complements” (14). Thus, what better than a fragmented work of fiction to represent a fragmented view of the real world?

2. SITUATING RAYMOND CARVER'S *WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE*

In this section, I will outline the different introductory remarks that lay the foundation for my central discussion in this study, that is, the chief role fragmentation plays in Carver's composite. It goes without saying that none of these preliminary considerations are the main focus of my argument. However, internalizing them is as vital as understanding my general point. I will start by justifying my use of the label “short story composite” whenever I refer to *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, not without first giving a brief overview of how neglected this genre has been and still is in the eyes of most critics. Then I will go on to explain my contempt for the term “minimalism,” which has been used incessantly in criticism dealing with Carver, as well as my reasons for rejecting it in my analysis. Finally, attempting to carry out a thorough piece of research on the narratological techniques of a given work of fiction without resorting to Genette's theory of narrative appears to be not only hazardous but also a possibly fatal venture. Hence, I will end this section by laying out the terminology proposed by Genette that will be crucial in the final section of this study where I discuss the reinforcement of fragmentation in Carver's composite due to the shifts in focalization in “Why Don't You Dance?,” “Viewfinder,” “Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit” and “A Serious Talk.”

2.1. An Overview of Generic Labels: The Short Story Composite or the Marginalized Among the Marginalized

It is a generally accepted fact that the short story came into being as a genre in its own right with Poe's remarks on Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842. However, theorists have dismissed it systematically in favor of other forms such as “poetry, drama, the epic, or the novel” (Patea 2). It is the latter that is responsible for overshadowing its potential. Despite Poe's pioneering contribution to its generic configuration and its being part of a long-standing storytelling tradition that has accompanied humanity since the dawn of time, the novel has received comparatively

more critical attention than the short story. In fact, critics are not alone in their preference of the former to the latter: readers seem to gravitate towards it more as well. As early as 1976 Charles E. May commented, "The increasing movement away from plot in the short story in the last thirty years has perhaps made the popular reader prefer the novel" (5). Little has changed since. The novel continues to attract readers who, lulled by its "spatial linearity" and "temporal beginning, middle and end" (5), find it a much more satisfying read than its always challenging counterpart.

The short story is not the most neglected of genres. Things are further complicated when yet another narrative form, halfway between the novel and the short story, comes into consideration. Most attempts to define the short story composite seem to be along the lines of that of scholars such as Silverman or Lundén, who consider it to be, in the latter's words, a "book consisting of autonomous short stories which interconnect and join into a larger hold" (11). Yet, consensus on what to call it is still elusive. From "short story cycle" to "short story sequence," many are the terms that have been used throughout the years to refer to the type of narrative to which most of Carver's works belong. The list goes on: "*story-novel, storied novel, composite novel, fragmentary novel, episodic novel, anthology novel, collective novel, para-novel, and rovelle*" (12-13). Of these, short story sequence and short story cycle appear to have been the option of choice for most critics. Nevertheless, I tend to agree with Lundén both in that neither of them is fully appropriate and that short story composite is the term that best captures the essence of the form. Favored by Luscher and Kennedy, the former has to do with the sequential nature of "the reader's experience of negotiating the text and assembling its patterns" (Lundén 15). The latter, which has been coined by Forrest L. Ingram and Susan Garland Mann, stresses its cyclicity (14). What I find problematic about these labels as well as that of short story cluster is that they are too specific. Since they point only to particular cases, their scope is way too limited for them to be eligible as the ideal umbrella term we are looking for. Instead of being far-reaching, they only refer to subcategories of the composite (16).

As Lundén explains, the greatest point of success in the term composite lies in that, unlike that of cycle or sequence, it is free of any links to a particular structural pattern (18). Furthermore, while the others somehow highlight the continuity of the form, short story composite is neutral enough to make allowances for the tension

between closure and openness that is inherent to the genre. On that basis, this will be the term I will use throughout my analysis.

2.2. Minimalism and Raymond Carver

That most critical work on Carver either has to do with minimalism or takes his being a minimalist for granted is not an understatement. Whether it is their starting point or their main focus of analysis, academics have for the most part agreed in that a minimalist scent is the most characteristic trait of Carver's oeuvre, especially in his first three works (Hallett 43). Among them, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* has stood out either as the utter "epitome of the minimalist approach to the short story" (Just 304) or a "'minimalist masterpiece'" (qtd. in Nessel 29) to dissenters and advocates of the label alike.

Providing that Carver's status as one of the most salient representatives of minimalism in academia seems to be a given, the fact that there is no consensus on what the term really means strikes us as astonishing, to say the least. Conceived initially as a reactionary literary movement against the quasi-histrionic experiments of postmodernism (Rodríguez 271), minimalism found in the short story an ideal vector of communication in the early eighties. Already in 1986 John Barth labeled this innovative way of writing fiction "'hyperrealistic minimalism'" or "'less-is-more'" school (qtd. in Hallett 43). However, many are the terms that have been used throughout the years to refer to the harsh rhetoric of those who, like Carver, Beattie, Ford, Wolff or Mason, to name a few, refused to write within the confines of traditional realism in the aftermath of postmodernist excesses. As creative a label as "'K-Mart minimalism,' 'Diet Pepsi minimalism,' and 'hick chic'" (qtd. in Nessel 30) were, the one to take root was finally minimalism.

In spite of the number of times Carver and minimalism have been coined together in studies devoted to short fiction from the eighties onwards, there are very few critics who have showed initiative in defining the term accurately. One of the rare exceptions is the aforementioned John Barth, who in "A Few Words About Minimalism" characterizes it as "terse, oblique, realistic, or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction" (qtd. in Mozley 5). Now, while its pioneering status is hard to ignore, by no means can we deem this a well-rounded

explanation of minimalism. Based on its lack of depth, it reads more as a declaration of intent than an illustrative definition altogether. If anything, it is a valid point of departure that will be developed further in the hands of other critics. Hallett, who devotes an entire chapter to explaining it in *Minimalism and the Short Story*, is perhaps the most relevant in this regard. To her, Chekhov's plotless lyricism meets Hemingway's hardboiled prose with a touch of Beckett's conception of language as devoid of meaning is the ultimate formula that lies at the core of minimalism, to put it simply. She lists as many as nine characteristics that she expands later on, of which a stark prose, concision and openness stand out as the major features of the movement (25). Tracing it back to its origins, hers is a thorough and convincingly argued analysis of minimalism that has been quoted extensively in criticism dealing with Carver. Yet, I cannot help but feel uncomfortable with the label. And Carver felt much the same way.

In the face of it being the *sine qua non* for his literary legacy, Carver spoke out against minimalism, especially resenting that "there's something about 'minimalist' that smacks of smallness of vision and execution" (qtd. in Mozley 3). There was and still is a whole subtext of negative connotations to the term contributing to his contempt towards it. After all, how can this so-called "smallness" account for one's greatness? More so than its pejorative meaning, the problem with minimalism lies elsewhere. To begin with, the lack of consensus regarding not only its definition but also the term used to refer to it seems to undermine its value. Besides, the label itself has been overrated. The more critics have tried to shed light on minimalism, the more they have obscured it. As a result, it has been devalued to the point of becoming a mere hollow term whose goal is to bring a somewhat heterogeneous group of writers together in order to achieve a ubiquitous illusion of unity. Moreover, its dealing with form exclusively makes it too superficial a label. Of course, form is important, but it is not the only feature one should bear in mind when it comes to evaluating any author's work. Content, and furthermore, its intrinsic relationship with form should be not only accounted for but also highlighted when analyzing the work of any writer in general and that of Carver in particular. The question we should be asking is, in Nessel's words, "How does Carver's style, so transparent, so sharp in places it almost pierces the skin, collaborate with his subjects, with the thematic universe of his art?" (30). For the most part, the advocates of minimalism have failed to acknowledge the importance of this issue and, as a

consequence, they have limited their scope to style alone rather than its implications when paired with subject matter as well. Nevertheless, the correlation between form and content is so fundamental in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* that necessarily my analysis will be devoid of any minimalist scent.

2.3. Genette's Typology: Voice, Mood and Alterations

Based on structuralism, Genette's work is part of a larger project shared by critics of the stature of Barthes and Todorov. Their ambitious enterprise consisted in creating a poetics that would be to literature what linguistics is to language, or, as Culler puts it, a landmark for critical analysis of any work of fiction that would shed light on the different devices that shape its final meaning (8). The goal was to turn the machinery that supports the narrative inside out, so to speak, in order to display what Todorov called "'grammar' of plot" (qtd. in Culler 8). Both his and Barthes' findings will prove to be indispensable for the configuration of Genette's own theory in *Narrative Discourse*. It is in this book where Genette will revisit the forms and figures his counterparts dwelled on so as to take them a step further by showing how a narrative can and in fact does organize them (8).

The first distinction he draws in his study is that between the terms *story*, *narrative* and *narrating*. Whereas the first refers to the "signified or narrative content" (Genette 27), the second has to do with the "signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself" (27). The third, on the other hand, points to "the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place" (27). Once he has clearly demarcated the boundaries separating these three levels, Genette goes on to explain the purpose of his study; that is, to ascertain the dynamics of the relationships between them. To this end, he takes Todorov's three levels of narrative—namely *tense*, *aspect* and *mood* (29)—as his point of departure to then reformulate and transform them into what he calls *tense*, *mood* and *voice* (31). These terms are neither identical nor radically opposed to Todorov's; they are simply arranged with a higher level of complexity that gives Genette's work a unique scent. In short, whilst both *tense* and *mood* refer to the connections between *story* and *narrative*, *voice* focuses on the associations between *narrating* and *narrative* and *narrating* and *story* (32).

Particularly relevant is the difference between voice and mood. Genette contends that one of the most unfortunate mistakes critics have made in other narratological studies is confusing these two distinct terms. In the light of this lacuna, he roots his contribution to the field in the very gap between the two. As he argues, we must be able to differentiate the question “*who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective*” from “the very different question *who is the narrator?*—or more simply, the question *who sees?* And the question *who speaks?*” (186). While the former has to do with mood (or focalization, which is Genette’s term for perspective), the latter deals with voice (in other words, the narrative voice). Now the most innovative aspect Genette introduces in the category of voice is the binary opposition between homodiegesis and heterodiegesis, elsewhere referred to as first-person and third-person narrative, respectively. Considering this, he contemplates two types of narrative: that which features a narrator who is not part of the story he tells (heterodiegetic), and that in which the narrator is present in the story (homodiegetic) (244-245). This terminology, which will come into play in my own analysis of Carver’s composite, has the benefit of ruling the confusion arising from the use of the first-person pronoun out (Fludernik 98).

As appropriate a background as Genette’s considerations on voice are, my real focus in this study will be his ideas on focalization in general and, more specifically, on what he calls alterations. Had it not been for his unique treatment of the latter, resorting to other similar theories of focalization, such as Stanzel’s or Bal’s, would not have been completely out of question. Genette contends that narratives can have three different types of focalization: that is, *zero* (where the narrator always knows more than the characters) *internal* (where the narrative uses a character as a focalizer) and *external focalization* (where the narrator has no access to the characters’ thoughts) (189-190). The greatest advantage of this categorization is that, according to it, any given narrative, be it internally or externally focalized, can either be fixed or variable at the same time (189). This is exactly what happens in the four stories of Carver’s composite that I will be analyzing in depth in section four. For all their significant differences, all of them are externally focalized. However, it is possible to identify certain shifts that, without interfering with the overall type of focalization that characterizes them, are worth mentioning due to how great their contribution to the fragmented nature of Carver’s

composite is. Genette calls these “isolated infractions, when the coherence of the whole still remains strong enough for the notion of dominant mode/mood to continue relevant” (195) alterations, which will also be my term of choice throughout this study. Alterations can be of two types: paralipsis, whereby one omits information we, as readers, should have access to, and paralepsis, which has to do with giving an excess of information (195). By applying the latter to these four stories I will show how the subtle changes in focalization in each of them greatly contribute to my general argument of pervading fragmentation in this composite.

3. THE COMPULSION TO ORDER: THEMATIC LINKS IN *WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE*

As noted above, the scarcity of criticism on the importance of fragmentation in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* stems from the unwavering attention most scholars have paid to the pursuit of coherence in Carver’s fiction as a whole. The reasons for this are twofold. I have already alluded to the first one, which is our inescapable human tendency to unify everything. What I have not mentioned yet is that the essential “tension between closural and anti-closural strategies” (Lundén 52) of the composite has justified—if not entirely, at least to some extent—the proliferation of coherence-oriented critical approaches to the genre in academia until recently. Since this narrative form “is constructed from an intricate combination of centripetal and centrifugal narrative forces” (52), acknowledging some degree of coherence is always a possibility even in those works where such a task seems unfeasible. This is the case of Carver’s: even though fragmentation is predominant in it, making allowances for the existence of certain unifying elements is still a viable option. A separate issue is whether focusing on them is worthwhile or not, but I will return to that matter later.

Much has been said about theme, which has often been deemed the most appropriate feature when it comes to bringing the individual stories of any composite together. In an attempt to supply the very “fundamental need” that “the desire to enclose” entails (Lundén 53), we tend to make of identifying the general theme of a work of fiction a *tour de force*. Regarded as the connective factor *par excellence*, it has been said to possess the power to provide us with not only the perfect unified narrative just as we had pictured it, but also a much wanted yet elusive path to knowledge. Hence,

being able to find an all-embracing thematic undercurrent in Carver's composite would unquestionably make it easier for us to meet the need for unity that shapes our ideal reading experience.

Disregarding love as the main theme of a composite entitled *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* is just one of the many ironies that imbue Carver's works. As Saltzman notes, "What they [the characters] talk about when they talk about love is usually anything but" (100). It is very difficult to regard love (or the lack thereof, for that matter) as the common thread between the discrete stories of this composite. Since it is too rigid a mould to make them fit in it, critics have offered certain variations on this theme in an attempt to characterize the composite as a whole, with varying degrees of success.

Some of them, like Hallett, advocate for "the tenuous union between men and women and the mysterious separations that always seem imminent" as the "most basic theme of Carver's stories" (51). The emphasis she places on the tension that is forever present in human relationships is to be found in Leypoldt's take on the subject as well. He maintains that "the collapse of marriage resulting from alcoholic excess" (120) is one of the most recurrent, if not "obsessive" (to use his actual word) themes in Carver's fiction.

On the other hand, there are other scholars such as Runyon who, like Hallett and Leypoldt in theory but unlike them in practice, tries to find a common factor that could provide us with a comprehensive view of Carver's composite. Although all of them have unity in mind as their main goal, the means to achieve it differ enormously. As opposed to Hallett's and Leypoldt's sole emphasis on the turmoil caused by the failure of human relationships, Runyon highlights the fact that there is not just one element connecting all the stories but many. His is not as simple a theory as that of his counterparts, and precisely because of its intricacy I deem it necessary to quote it at length:

Every two stories (and sometimes three) display too the same basic image in different patterns, in different contexts. Like the elderly husband who knew his wife was right next to him but grieved because he couldn't see her, the stories too seem at times to be half-aware of the nearly identical mate that lies right next to them and almost yearn to break out of their boundaries to make the connection already half-visible beneath the surface. (133)

The originality of Runyon's views on the matter could perhaps justify a special mention. Nevertheless, to me his claim that the stories are almost replicas of each other is arguable, to say the least. The degree of unity and coherence he is after is more likely to be found in a novel than a short story composite. Actually, when found in the latter, it just comes across as an unnatural, somewhat artificial imposition.

Despite my reservations, I am more inclined to agree with Hallett's and Leypoldt's views on theme than with those of Runyon's. Though indebted to the search for unity that equally motivates the latter, their emphasis on the tension created by the failure of human relationships greatly differs from his in nature. The way I see it, Runyon's theory aspires to acquire an all-encompassing status, whereas Hallett's and Leypoldt's are free from that pretension. In claiming that the disintegration of people's relationships could well be the common thematic factor bringing the stories of the composite together, not only are Hallett and Leypoldt, each in their own way, making a valid point, but they are also conceding that certain loose ends will be forever present in a work like Carver's. Besides, even the theme itself has connotations of fragmentation, which points to the particular chaotic way in which the stories were written and arranged. For that reason, it is Hallett's and Leypoldt's implied acknowledgement of the shortcomings of even the most valid unifying feature of this composite that make their readings all the more realistic and altogether useful for my own analysis.

4. FROM UNITY TO FRAGMENTATION: ANTI-CLOSURAL STRATEGIES IN *WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE*

Having said that theme is virtually the only connective factor bringing the discrete stories in Carver's composite together, it is time to focus on the other feature that characterizes the genre, that is, fragmentation. Although all composites possess a certain degree of unity, the truth is Carver's stands out for how open a narrative it is. While the former plays a minor role in it, the latter can actually be regarded as its distinguishing trait. In this section I will demonstrate how the numerous loose ends we encounter in this composite make the text as chaotic as the world it aims to portray. With this purpose in mind, I will first concentrate on the many unbridgeable temporal and spatial gaps that saturate it. Next, I will examine the multiplicity of devices Carver uses in order to portray the characters and how these contribute to the fragmented nature

of the text and finally, I will explain how the subtle changes in terms of focalization in “Why Don’t You Dance?,” “Viewfinder,” “Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit” and “A Serious Talk” create not only a sense of motion which mirrors the lack of harmony of the composite as a whole, but also the “heteroglossia,” to use Bahktin’s term, that makes it so “open-ended and continually provocative” to us readers (Garcia 45).

4.1. Temporal and Spatial Gaps

It is not unheard of that time and place have normally been regarded as two narrative features that help foster cohesion not only in novels, but also in many short story composites. Individual chapters (in the case of the former) or discrete stories (in the case of the latter) that would be impossible to connect otherwise often come together either because the action occurs at the same time or in the same place.³ Whilst in these types of narratives time and place behave as cohesive elements, in those stories where there are “no transitions, no narratorial bridges connecting one story to another” (Kennedy 196) they tend to act as elements of disruption. They become responsible for the gaps between the stories, as is the case in Carver’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

Due to the lack of a continuous plot, temporal breaks are not very relevant in this composite. While there are some temporal jumps dispersed throughout the discrete stories, none of them are insightful enough to affect our vision of the composite as a whole. For instance, the girl in “Why Don’t You Dance?” retells the odd incident at the man’s house “weeks later” (Carver 8). Statements such as “Things are better now” or “I don’t know what we were thinking of in those days” (14) in “Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit” point to an explicit discordance between story time and narrative time, also known as an anachrony, to use Genette’s term. If we continue reading we will find a reference to the narrator’s father’s death “eight years ago” (16) that reinforces the idea of coming back and forth in time in this story. That said, there are no overt temporal links between the individual stories that could wrap up the composite as a whole. Since they are completely independent in this regard, discontinuities cannot be interpreted as temporal ellipses (Lundén 90).

³ For specific examples, see the third chapter of Lundén’s *The United Stories of America* where he does an outstanding job at analyzing several composites where this is the case.

Spatial gaps are also worth noting. Providing the composite lacks a consistent setting, filling the holes between each story becomes an impossible task. There are several issues hindering the reader's attempts to find a spatial connection between them, the first one being that each of them happens in a different place and the second that references to actual locations are scant. Yakima, which is mentioned in as many as three stories ("Gazebo," "Tell the Women We're Going," and "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off"), is the one that is most significant. Apart from that, the only real places that appear in the composite are Sacramento in "Sacks," Crescent City in "The Calm" and Albuquerque in the title story.

In the midst of these spatial breaks, special attention should be given to the fact that the most recurrent setting is the characters' houses. It is the main setting in seven out of seventeen stories and a secondary setting in other four. Actually, all of the four stories that I want to focus on are set in houses. Curiously, despite how high our level of involvement with the situations the characters undergo in these four stories is, we cannot find any sort of evidence in the text to justify a connection between them in terms of setting. The houses where they are set could be located in the same city or even belong to the same neighborhood, but there is no way in which we can prove it. None of this is significant, however. What really matters is that virtually the only detail Carver gives away is the fact that most stories are set in houses. The way in which he portrays them as emblematic of the shattered relationships of those inhabiting them has little to do with our traditional view of houses as homes very much indebted to the spatial theories proposed by Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. Whereas for the latter houses are "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (6), for Carver they are just reinforcements of the characters' isolation, mere reminders of how alone they are even when they are surrounded by other people. As Siebert suggests, "Such spaces reflect a sense of identity to the characters themselves, but one that becomes confining" for they "house the accumulated pain of the characters who live in them" (3). They are intended to stress the overall fragmented nature of the world within and outside the composite.

Instead of describing settings accurately, Carver only provides us with few and vague strokes that compose an imprecise, yet evocative general picture. The truth is there is no way in which we can connect these stories neither in terms of place nor time,

not only because we lack the necessary information to do so but also because it would be futile: as Garcia argues, the “absences created in each story do not add up to any type of unified whole” (9). The fragmentation fostered by the unbridgeable gaps created by the lack of temporal and spatial unity between the stories is intentional: it is meant to be a reflection of the real world. The bigger the picture, the more relatable it is. The less detailed the description, the fewer problems we encounter while trying to establish a link between this fictional world and the world to which we, as readers, belong.

4.2. Character Breaks

Criticism on *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* has often provided us with a totalizing view of the characters that feature in each of the seventeen stories that comprise it. For example, Saltzman speaks of Carver’s characters as a collective whole. His is a description in categorical terms: they all “work for a living . . . fret about mortgages and dream about vacations . . . watch television, talk on the telephone, live among brand names, wonder about their neighbors” (3). They are just ordinary people leading an ordinary life, very much like citizens of what he defines as “proletarian America, a terrain of fast food, used cars, and garish billboards” (4) or what Nocera identifies as “the marginal America of junk collectors, of the new poor excluded from the story of the winners and the rules of official economy” (4). Consequently, they do not deserve a separate mention since their common traits greatly outweigh their singularities. In a similar vein, Cornwell writes of Carver’s characters that they “typically drift through life, passively reacting to circumstances whose provenance or true relation to themselves they are unable to discern, let alone attempt to address” (345). Just like Saltzman, he does not consider it necessary to talk about them one by one. There is no room for individuality in his all-encompassing description since, according to him, these characters “lack the authority to be themselves” (345). For theirs is a freedom that can be regarded as the “the zero degree of individualism,” they have the capability to “go anywhere, do anything, have anything, be anyone” (346). They represent the blue-collar America that Carver wrote for and about in his fiction (Mullen 99; Sleeve 75).

However, Saltzman’s and Cornwell’s accounts represent only the tip of the iceberg that emerges in the hands of Taub and Weber. Whereas the former provide us

with a general foundation, the latter are much more concerned with the implications of those traits that deprive Carver's characters of their individuality and make them part of a tightly knit, virtually indivisible whole. Taub, for instance, suggests that the feature that brings Carver's characters together is their unequivocal sense of failure, which is not only their major flaw but also the main reason why their own country "looks at them, if it ever does, with moralizing contempt rather than compassion" (103). Carver's characters are no heroes. Their fates are marked by and inseparable from the domestic sphere in which they dwell, forever drunk, lonesome and wretched. Hence, their most distinctive trait is their everlasting mediocrity, which shapes up their role as losers in a world where numbness is inescapable (104). For his part, Weber stresses not the commonplace status of the characters in Carver's fiction but their inclination towards calamity. In his eyes, the strongest link between those whom he considers "apparent masters of deliberate self-destruction" (63) is their miserable existence marked by tragedy rather than mediocrity.

Both Taub's and Weber's speculations about the roles the characters play in the stories implies that such characterization is in fact intentional and not just accidental, something that is absent from Saltzman's and Cornwell's and that, to me, represents their greatest success. Still, this is the only aspect of their arguments with which I agree. In treating the characters of the composite as a whole, I believe Taub and Weber as well as Saltzman and Cornwell are merely deceiving themselves. Their efforts to create a comprehensive view of this matter are, just like the label of minimalism I discussed in the second section of this study, an illusion of unity based on a somewhat legitimate fact that proves to be trivial nonetheless: to say that Carver's characters share certain features is already stating the obvious; to go as far as to attempt to group them under the same label based on that detail alone is pointless altogether for it adds nothing new to our discussion of the particularities of Carver's composite as a narrative form. Besides, as Kennedy asserts, "In a genre marked by formal breaks that relentlessly signal social differences or psychological distances, gaps between characters can never be entirely masked by the semblance of community" (196-197). What these critics have failed to see is, firstly, the isolation the characters suffer underneath this illusion of communal life and, secondly, the multiple devices Carver used in order to veil their alienation and consequent connotations of fragmentation.

Regardless of the initial impression of unity that we get when analyzing the characters in this composite, the reality that lies underneath the surface is very different. Since Carver's ultimate goal is to talk about the disintegration of a sense of community in postmodern life, it is fair to say that every single element used in the construction of the composite will work towards it. Characterization is not an exception. The bonds between the characters prove to be only a façade, for all the elements Carver uses to characterize them point to the fragmented nature of the world they belong to. The most paradigmatic one is the omnipresent motif of alcohol. In virtually all the stories it acts as a catalyst for conversations between the characters that would never take place otherwise. Not only does it make up for the emotional vacuum in their bleak lives, but it also works "against the formation of personal relationships or communal ties" (Kennedy 210). It is a double-edged sword, for it both combats and reinforces the isolation that motivates the characters to turn to it in the first place. Television watching, which is another important element when it comes to defining most characters in the composite, works the same way. Although it is possible to say it fills the silence between troubled marriages, it also "contributes to alienation by encouraging a facile skepticism" (211). Its influence on the downtrodden lives of the characters is so powerful that it swells past the border of the fictional world they inhabit, seeping both into the structure of the text and the tone of the "deadpan expository authorial voice" (Mullen 104). Ultimately, these elements highlight both the death of those so-called communal ties to which Carver wanted to draw attention to and the way in which the intrinsic form of the composite supports it.

4.3. Polyphony: Multiple Focalization

4.3.1. "Why Don't You Dance?"

If we were to divide the story in different parts so as to analyze it better, then the first one would correspond to the scene where, upon staring out the window, the protagonist and focalizer of the story makes a mental comparison between his present and past life. The narration starts in an almost impersonal fashion with two perfectly objective sentences that make us think of the heterodiegetic narrator as the observer type: "In the kitchen, he poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard. The mattress was stripped and the candy-striped sheets lay beside two

pillows on the chifffonier” (Carver 3). As the story proceeds, we realize how right we were in thinking so: indeed, the primary mood of the story is external focalization. But there is more to this description, for it is loaded with notes of fragmentation that gradually gain strength as we read on. In effect, the objects the man is looking at from the window “embody an urge to see and describe ‘everything’” that they fail to provide us with for “they do not create continuity in the field of vision” (Amir 77). Instead, the space they represent is “two-dimensional, as if it were meant to illustrate the flatness of a photographic sheet, rather than an actual three-dimensional space” (77). Lacking a home to surround them, these domestic items “lose their significance and disintegrate” (Lehman 4-5) and, in so doing, they add to the reigning sense of fragmentation of the story.

Yet, this will be virtually the only scene where the man’s being the focalizer is completely evident. As detached as the narrator’s claims are in the first part of the story, they still show that the protagonist is the focalizer, if only occasionally. Henceforth, they are in stark contrast with the even more impersonal tone the narrator uses in the second part of the story in order to describe how the young couple find the yard sale. Here all we get is a reportorial account of the exchange of words between the boy and the girl: little do we know about what is in their minds. The many dialogue markers (“he said,” “she said”) that saturate this part of the story hinder the natural flow of Carver’s prose. I agree with Nessel in that they are “deft rhetorical jabs, disrupting with almost irritating consistency the natural rhythm of voice and breath” (38). Not only do they suggest the possibility of a crisis similar to that undergone by the man in their own relationship, but they also point to the formal fragmentation that characterizes the story as a whole.

Although we might have thought that as soon as the man reappeared the fact that he is the focalizer would become clear straight away, this is not the case. Interestingly enough, even after he comes back from the market, sack in hand, and starts interacting with the couple, the narrator maintains the hardboiled, detached narrative style that he used while he was gone. The sense of disconnectedness that started to build up with the proliferation of narratorial markers in his absence rises in crescendo in his presence, for once the dealing is done and they all sit in “the simulated living room” in the yard, “they are like a simulated family, together but disconnected” (Mullen 106). Besides,

there is little evidence that the information is filtered through the man's consciousness. Based exclusively on the narrator's straightforward account of how the characters haggle, drink and dance, we cannot tell if his vision is attached to that of the man or not for sure.

There are still some moments when, in zooming in on him, the narrator reassures us that the man is still the focalizer of the story. For instance, with claims such as "The man sat on the sofa, leaned back, and stared at the boy and the girl" (6), the camera goes back to its initial position on the man's shoulder. This is more clearly illustrated when the narrator explains that "in the lamplight, there was something about their faces. It was nice or it was nasty. There was no telling" (7). At this very moment, that the focus is on the man even though there are two more characters in the scene is impossible to overlook. After that, the camera zooms out again shifting to a panoramic view: the music is playing, the drinks are flowing. And just when the man is about to pour another drink, the couple disappears from our range of vision and he becomes the focus once more: "Why don't you kids dance? He decided to say, and then he said it. 'Why don't you dance?'" (8). Perhaps the most remarkable change with regard to focalization in this story is the one in its coda. Indeed, in the very last paragraph, the focalizer is not the man anymore but the girl. This shift can be regarded as an instance of *paralepsis* for it counts as an "inroad into the consciousness of a character in the course of a narrative generally conducted in external focalization" (Genette 197).

In conclusion, even though external focalization remains the primary mood, the numerous changes of focus greatly contribute to the creation a sense of disintegration that brings attention to the chaotic nature of the text and the very lives of the characters in this story. In zooming in and out, the narrator submerges readers in a constant motion that fills them with a sense of fragmentation. The lack of harmony it creates, which is reinforced by the very disjointed nature of the text, is equally visible in the rest of the stories in the composite, as I will now show in discussing "Viewfinder," "Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit" and "A Serious Talk."

4.3.2. "Viewfinder"

Like the previous story, "Viewfinder" is externally focalized. Nevertheless, this time we find a homodiegetic narrator who happens to be the protagonist as well, or, to

use Genette's term, an autodiegetic narrator. It is through him that we as readers take a glimpse of the fictional world both he and the photographer are part of. Not only does he share his personal impressions with us, but he also provides us with valuable details that will help us form a mental image of the actual setting where the story takes place.

The story can be clearly divided into two parts. In the first one, the action takes place inside the narrator's house and the focus is on him in a fairly obvious way. His position is always central no matter if he is talking to the photographer, making coffee or scrutinizing a photograph. Compared to the previous story, the tone in "Viewfinder" is far more personal and direct. Still, albeit the conversational vibe of the narrator's speech, what we get is only an illusion of closeness for we are still shut down from the protagonist's mind most of the time. As colloquial as his remarks are, they are only perceptions of the outer scene: "He would stand on the sidewalk in front of your house, locate your house in the viewfinder, push down the lever with one of his hooks, and out would pop your picture. I'd been watching from the window, you see" (Carver 10). The only instance of an internal focalized statement in this story occurs when the narrator asks himself, however rhetorically: "So why would I want a photograph of this tragedy?" (11). After this *paralepsis*, there will be no other major shifts in focalization that could potentially affect the primary mood of the story.

Considering that as long as the action stays inside so does the focus, it is not a coincidence, I think, that taking the action outside the house means zooming out. As soon as they step outside in this part of the story, the focus becomes broader, as evidenced by the sudden change from a first-person singular "I" to a first-person plural "we": "We went outside. He adjusted the shutter. He told me where to stand, and we got down to it" (12). While the narrator is still the focalizer, the figure of the photographer gains some visibility as well. What we get is a sort of multidimensional behind-the-scenes picture of how the narrator gets his photographs taken. In other words, we can see one of the characters posing and the other one pressing the button simultaneously.

Even though we cannot really speak of major shifts in focalization, the zooming out we experience in the second part of the story is worth noting when it comes to differentiating it from the first. At the beginning the narrator is inside looking outside from the window. Later on, once the photographer comes in, the action will unfold indoors and the focus will be inside. The final scene, however, takes place outside. This

is quite significant, for it points to the fact that “the narrator is no longer only a head trapped within a still photograph; he now defies that stasis and repeats his rock-throwing motion” (Garcia 13). At the same time, this constant inwards and outwards motion mirrors the motion we experience while reading the story. Right at the end of the story, the photographer warns the narrator that he “doesn’t do motion shots” (13), which seems quite ironic since we, as readers, are in constant movement. Given that the Polaroids render “the lack of focus in the character’s life, and how inadequate his means of representation is to a desire for precise articulation of selfhood” (Dozoby 290), the reason why the photographer is unable to do motion shots seems clear. The narrator has the ability the photographer lacks, for the story itself is, metaphorically, a motion shot: his zooming in and out creates an unavoidable sense of disintegration. By incorporating these changes into his discourse the narrator places us readers in the viewfinder to then broaden the focus of his camera again. That is to say, he takes us in and out of the narration as he pleases dragging us back and forth, and in so doing he connects with us. “I was trying to make a connection” (12), he tells the photographer, and at certain points, he does. It is precisely in those moments when, being fictional and all, we cannot help but sympathize with him.

4.3.3. “Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit”

Although focalization is again external in “Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit,” the homodiegetic narrator in this story, unlike that in “Viewfinder,” will not make of himself its focus. In other words: even if he is the focalizer, his position in the story is peripheral at best. The first part of the story is nothing other than a relation of the things he has seen (the story actually opens with a charged “I’ve seen some things”), whether it is conflicts in which he had no active part or traumatic events he was not involved in. In the first couple of pages the narrator devotes himself to retelling how his wife Myrna and Ross (also known as Mr Fixit) started their extramarital relationship. Prior to it, he makes a brief mention to how he walked into his mother and her lover shortly after his father died. Here, as foreshadowed in the opening sentence, the role of the narrator is that of an observer. Even though it begins with a promising “All this happened not too long ago, three years about. It was something in those days” (Carver 16), the second part of the story does not shed much light on the present situation of the narrator either.

Again, in this part of the story the narrator is in the shadow of the other characters. It is almost as if he were a cameraman following the others around in order to capture what they are doing whilst keeping him out of sight.

His being the focalizer all throughout the story does not mean, however, that there are no disturbances affecting the harmony of the outcome of the narrative. They might not be obvious at first glance, but they surely exist. Some of them have to do with focalization. While it is true that we see the story through the narrator's eyes at all times, he was not present in some of the scenes he describes. For instance, he explains, "This guy's [Ross's] second wife had come and gone, but it was his first wife who had shot him for not meeting his payments" (14), yet there is no way in which the narrator could know this without being there to see it or having someone tell him. Neither of those is the case as far as we know. Something similar happens when he mentions: "His one wife jailed him once. The second one did" (14). Despite not being significant enough to make us speak of multiple focalization in the story, these instances of *paralepsis* still contribute to the overall fragmentation of the text.

Notwithstanding that they do not have to do with focalization, the numerous changes of focus that happen throughout the story are much more relevant in this regard. To go back to the cinematographic metaphor I used above, what this means is that the narrator neither leaves the camera in the hands of anyone else nor keeps it still. From his mother, Myrna and Melody to Ross, many are the characters that he draws his attention to. Although the majority of the time he focuses his gaze on others, thus creating a sense of perpetual motion, those few moments in which he zooms in and focuses on himself are the most revealing ones. Even if they do not appear very often, statements such as "Things are better now" or "I don't know what we were thinking of in those days" (14) provide us with a much-needed sense of immediacy. It is in these moments when he turns the camera on himself that we are reminded of the fact that the narrator is also a character in this story. Furthermore, in saying "I used to make fun of him when I had the chance. But I don't make fun of him anymore. God bless and keep you, Mr Fixit" (16) he becomes all the more relatable. But this is not all. In so doing, he also hints at the very essence of the story, that is, that just like Mr Fixit, he is an alcoholic, a loser. Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit, narrator and Ross, are not that different. As fraught with chaos as it is, Mr Fixit's life mirrors the narrator's almost perfectly.

Consequently, the turmoil that fills his as well as Mr Fixit's existence equally reaches his story. In effect, the fragmented nature of the narrative with its slight changes of focalization and its multiple shifts of focus is the best illustration of how chaotic both their lives are.

4.3.4. "A Serious Talk"

Perhaps the most chaotic story out of the four I will analyze is the also externally focalized "A Serious Talk." Although in reading "Why Don't You Dance?," "Viewfinder" and "Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit" we get a similar overall sense of motion, in this story the discrete changes that are responsible for it are more numerous and noticeable. Before describing this issue in depth, it is worth noting that the sense of fragmentation that characterizes this story as a whole is foreshadowed in one of its very first details. When Burt parks the car, he notices the "pie he'd dropped the night before" (Carver 89) in Vera's drive. As random as this fallen pie might seem at first glance, it is actually key in conforming the atmosphere in which the story takes place. Indeed, even before we grasp its true significance, it succeeds in "giving off a sense of disorder and chaos that carries throughout the story" (Garcia 33).

The first shift contributing to the reigning chaos of the story can be found at the very beginning of the story. Here, on zooming out, the heterodiegetic narrator manages to capture the entire scene: he describes how Burt, who is the focalizer, arrives at the house, the exchange of Christmas gifts between the family members and their brief conversation. More so than on actions, his focus at this point are the house and the Christmas decorations that have been put up around it prior to Burt's visit. Whether they refer to the blinking Christmas tree or the leftovers from the previous night, the true importance of these descriptions lies in their being responsible for setting the mood. They serve the purpose of emphasizing the time of the year in which the story happens and, consequently, the celebrations that should be taking place but are not and its ironic implications (Garcia 34). Yet, as much as the narrator stays away from the characters' consciousness in his attempt to set the scene in this initial part of the story, there are moments where his attachment to Burt is made evident. Statements such as "But Burt liked it where he was. He liked it in front of the fireplace, a glass in his hand, his house, his home" (90) or "He stacked them in his arms, all six, one for every ten times she had

ever betrayed him” (90) point to his being the focalizer of the story. Nevertheless, these are kept to a minimum for what the narrator wants to emphasize by detaching himself from the scene he is describing is that Burt is equally detached from it. In other words, just like him, Burt is an outsider in his own home.

Already outlined in the first part of the story, the fragmented nature of the text will stand out all the more when the conversation, the so-called “serious talk” between the couple begins. Burt’s failed declaration of intent ““I want to apologize to you for last night. I want to apologize to the kids, too”” (90) is the starting signal for a series of changes of focus alternating between himself and Vera. Whenever one of them takes the floor, the camera changes the focus and makes the character in question the centre of attention. One minute Burt is in a focal position: “He considered her robe catching fire, him jumping up from the table, throwing her down onto the floor and rolling her over into the living room, where he would cover her with his body. Or should he run to the bedroom for a blanket?” (92); The other Vera takes his place: “She said, ‘Are you just going to drink it like that, out of a cup?’ She said” (92). The contrast between the two interventions is quite telling. While the narrator’s account of Burt’s disturbed fantasy is an instance of *paralepsis*, his remarks about Vera are merely reportorial observations, and very laconic ones at that. The narrator, just like Burt, is shut down from her consciousness in spite of the fact that he is looking right at her. His inability to access her thoughts and feelings illustrates both how much of a mystery Vera is to her ex-husband and the tension this conversation (or the lack thereof) has built between them.

Appropriately enough, the shifts of focus in this part of the story are strengthened by the characters’ constant coming in and going out of rooms whose motion they mirror. The numerous references to their being in movement raise the reader’s awareness of the disintegration that pervades the text. In claiming, “He turned around and went back to the kitchen” (91) and “Vera came back into the kitchen” (93), for instance, the narrator impregnates the narrative with a sense of never-ending chaos that can be perceived in the multiple changes of focus from one character to the other as well. It is precisely the tension they embody, the “menace” (to use Carver’s term) that marks the miserable existence of this couple that shapes the serious talk Carver has with us in this story.

5. CONCLUSIONS

So fixated we are with unity that we have come to turn our reading experience into a quest for it. While it might be appropriate to maintain this insistence on coherence when we analyze certain composites, in the case of Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* this is a problematic issue: as much as we strive to find a way to connect each discrete story, there will always be loose ends that are impossible to tie up. But, what if we are trying to make all the pieces of the puzzle fit together when they were not meant to fit at all in the first place? Actually, once we leave our pressing need to find the means to connect everything in Carver's composite behind, we realize that fragmentation is not its biggest vice but its best virtue. Disunity is strength in this composite, for the dominant lack of unity that characterizes the fictional world its characters inhabit is nothing other than a reflection of the real world we as readers live in, a world we can barely comprehend when we look at it through the one-dimensional lens of coherence.

This does not mean that the universe in Carver's composite is in complete and utter chaos. On the contrary, it is possible to detect a degree of coherence that brings its discrete stories closer, that is, theme. In fact, many are the critics who have explored this aspect, going as far as to create intricate theories and far-fetched metaphors apt to justify the existence of an underlying theme linking all the stories.

Openness is an equally if not more relevant feature than coherence when it comes to characterizing the short story composite as a genre. As Lundén points out, "Even though there is always a measure of linkage between stories in a composite, what really stands out in this form of narrative is the disruption created by the gaps between the stories" (89). The many temporal and spatial discontinuities that subdue *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* validate this point. The lack of accurate references to either when or where each story takes place sheds light on how significant the gaps between them are and, in turn, on the fragmented nature of the text for which they are responsible. However, discontinuity is just one of the features of the intrinsic open-endedness of the genre. Multiplicity, which affects not only time and place but also characterization, is just as important in that regard. Despite how hard critics have tried to bring the characters in the composite together and analyze them as a whole, the fragmentation that results from the multiple elements Carver utilizes to characterize

them overshadows any former trace of coherence. Further adding to the open form of this composite is its multiple focalization. The different narrators, alterations and subtle changes of focus that pervade each discrete story contribute to the “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Lundén 97) that makes it a multi-voiced, polyphonic text.

Carver’s composite illustrates almost perfectly the plurality, multiplicity and polyphony that characterize the short story composite as a genre. Furthermore, its being characterized not by the prominence of its closural devices but by its fragmentation makes the fictional text all the more appropriate a mirror of the real world and its dominant lack of coherence. When Joyce Carol Oates defined the short story as a dream verbalized, she could not have been any more accurate. It is true that dreams are not always coherent. However, they do not make less sense for it. And neither do short story composites.

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