"Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes," and ESL: Raymond Carver in the Classroom
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Abstract: This article explores several elements of Raymond Carver's oeuvre and its various applications to ESL and remedial English literature, comprehension, and composition classes. Due to the difficulty inherent in teaching ESL students literature featuring advanced verbiage and complex grammatical structure, a modern, minimalist writer like Carver and his condensed, easy-to-read short stories is a natural choice for an instructor of literature. Advanced instruction of dialogue and meaning, themes and symbols, and even the process of editing writing in order to improve meaning and reduce "clutter" can be instructed using Raymond Carver's *Collected Stories*. Moreover, this article gives instructors certain teaching methods to aid the ESL student on his journey from a superficial understanding of grammar to a deeper understanding of meaningful, literary English.

KEYWORDS: Raymond Carver, ESL, American literature, instruction
literature classes out of fear, though many are very curious about American culture and literature and would love to read vibrant stories from an American "point of view." There must be a new way to begin teaching these intangible, sparkling parts of English present in prose in a way that the student can simultaneously grasp easily understood vocabulary and grammar while discovering a deeper understanding of English. As this article will illustrate, Raymond Carver's short stories solve this problem. While students may struggle with close reading of Carver's work at first, his oeuvre of literature is an excellent starting place for the Japanese student (or any ESL student) to decipher meaning in dialogue, understand themes in literature, and appreciate the editing process in writing to a fuller extent.

The recommended text for use in a course would be the Library of America's *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*, as it provides an abundance of Carver's earlier minimalism in combination with his later works of deeper emotional depth. Adequate for both a class of low-level ESL students struggling with basic English ability or an advanced ESL student attempting to understand English literature at a deeper level, this larger text provides the opportunity to scaffold from extremely short, open ended stories that require close reading in order to ascertain meaning like "Popular Mechanics" to longer pieces that evoke more emotional reflection and contain a definite theme, like the famous "Cathedral." An instructor, of course, could choose to utilize any of Carver's smaller collections, such as *Would You Please Be Quiet, Please?* or *Cathedral*; however, the student may then miss out on Carver's shifts in writing styles and the inclusion of *Beginners* in the *Collected Stories*, in which the instructor can illustrate editing changes between the Carver's manuscript and final published copies. Finally, the *Collected Stories* allow for quick, short bites of American literature that can be adjusted to the students' digestion. With more than 75 short stories included in the collection, the instructor can assign an extensive close reading and annotation exercise for a single, smaller story for the low-level student, two or three stories with a corresponding reaction paragraph for the intermediate ESL student, or a longer reflection essay for an element or question about a story for the advanced student. Projects based on the text could include analyses of Carver's stories from draft to final editing, student created and presented summaries of stories not covered in the class, biographical analysis of Carver's different stages of writing, and, of course, the final research paper. This instruction would be appropriate for both an international college-level English literature, comprehension, or composition course as well as a remedial or ESL English course here in America.
One of the Carver’s defining writing techniques noticeable in the text is the inclusion of meaningful, terse, and lifelike dialogue. Carver stated that "Good dialogue is angled toward a character's intentions," (qtd. in Unger) and many ESL students tend to miss this aspect of conversations between characters – that they contain motivation, educational background, ethnicity, age, gender, emotion, memories, and not just rote information to advance the plot. Carver condenses these emotions into the tightest package possible, and the ESL student should be oriented toward discovering these elements of character present in the close reading of dialogue. While Carver's earliest stories are difficult for an ESL student because of their reliance on nuance and Carver's objective narration (allowing the reader to assume motivation and meaning), later work has less minimalism and fuller meaning – allowing the ESL reader to pick up on the dialogue and determine meaning quite easily.

One example is "Everything Stuck to Him," a story in which an older man recalls to his daughter, who is on the cusp of adulthood, his own youthful marriage and her infancy. The first difference the ESL student will notice is Carver's purposeful removal of quotation marks from dialogue. As Carver states in his essay "On Writing," "[the] punctuation are in the right places so they can best say what they are meant to say" (730). Students should reflect on why Carver felt some stories like "Everything Stuck to Him" require no quotation marks for dialogue, while many of his other stories have them. The student may also have difficulty with the frequent voice shifts and interspersions of metafiction. The story is narrated in third person, and as the father begins the narrative of his younger years (which the reader would assume should begin in first person), he commences in third person, recounting, "They were kids themselves, but they were crazy in love, this eighteen-year-old boy and this seventeen-year-old girl..." (304). This shift, or rather, lack of expected shift, challenges the student to note that the father is speaking of his past memories in an fanciful way – romanticizing it. The father also interrupts the narration, probing his daughter's attentiveness, asking "Are you still with me? Are you getting the picture?" (304). Carver seems to purposefully include the remark to inquire whether the reader also is paying attention at the same time the father alerts his daughter to the importance of the story.

As the student continues, there are several other conventions in the dialogue that simultaneously challenge the ESL student and provide an avenue for instruction in idiomatic expressions present in everyday English. As the father continues his story about his experiences in his daughter's infancy, he states, "...the baby slept in the living room. Let's say the baby was about three months old..." (305). The ESL student may question why the father
says, "Let's say" in his story, and while the native English speaker may know that the father is generalizing the age of the daughter, the ESL student may struggle to understand this fact. The father continues his story of caring for his newborn daughter the night before he is to go goose hunting, and when the baby becomes colicky and refuses to sleep, he states he "...did a terrible thing. He swore" (307). This leads both to a fight between the young father and his wife about him abandoning the wife and colicky daughter for a day of goose hunting and to the father’s realization that he had done something wrong as he now recounts the story to his older daughter. The student should note that the father is actively judging his own actions in the story as he recalls it. The story ends with the young father deciding to stay with his wife and ultimately leads into short, intensely contrite statements between them:

"Hey, the boy said.
I'm sorry, the girl said.
It's all right, the boy said.
I didn't mean to snap like that.
It was my fault, he said." (308)

The short length of the dialogue combined with the quickness of the wife's forgiveness and the humorous story about him upending his plate of waffles and bacon into his lap (from which the short story derives its name) contrasts with the final paragraph in which the older father and his daughter now cope with a more distant wife – one that has left the father due possibly to death or divorce. "Things change, he says. I don't know how they do. But they do without your realizing it or wanting them to," (309) the father states, and the reader is left wondering what change has occurred. The student is then forced to make assumptions through analyzing dialogue about what the story means in the current situation of the father and daughter's lives. Why is the daughter a "survivor from top to bottom?" (304) Why is an obviously American father living in Milan? Why does the father think it's "not much of story," (309) but tells it anyway? The close reading necessary to answer these questions should involve instruction on both annotation and student reaction to the text, and though "Everything Stuck to Him" is an excellent text to teach analysis of dialogue with, Carver's oeuvre is replete with stories in which ESL students can enrich their own English comprehension and understanding of nuanced English. For further advanced analysis of Carver's use of "inferential processes" (Clark 156) in the dialogue of "One More Thing," Billy Clark's essay "Beginning With 'One More Thing'":


Pragmatics And Editorial Intervention In The Work Of Raymond Carver” is a wonderful resource to aid in students understanding of implication.

If a student were asked what the theme of "Everything Stuck to Him" was, he might answer with "things change," “love is important,” or, for the astute learner that might assume the title relates to the theme, "all your choices stick with you," but there are many themes to explore in Carver's stories and many ways to discover them. While there are Carver stories that are unambiguous in their expression of theme, like the small bread rolls that provide a release from grief in "A Small, Good Thing," stories like "The Bridle" are an excellent way of showing theme through metaphor and symbol.

"The Bridle" introduces a female who is an apartment manager and hairstylist who rents an apartment to an out-of-luck middle-aged farmer with two teenage sons and a young wife in tow. The father, with a "chest like a bull" (508), takes up a dare from another tenant and jumps to the apartment pool from the roof of the cabana, missing the pool and injuring his head. He then quickly moves his family out of the apartment, leaving only a horse bridle from his days as an owner of a losing race horse. The final passage, mirroring some of the young wife's disclosures about her family, notes that the bridle allows the "rider [to pull] the reins this way and that, and the horse turns. It's that simple….I guess you'd catch on a hurry. When you felt the pull….You'd know you were going somewhere" (513). If the instructor assigns a paper reflecting on how a minor part of the story, the bridle, reflects the theme of the story, the ESL student should be able to decipher its larger meaning: The bridle is much like the middle age man leading his family wherever desires to lead them, just like a horse that he is riding.

Themes are more difficult to decode in his earlier works, and a good example of this is "Neighbors." In this story, a neighboring couple is given the keys to another vacationing couple's apartment to feed the couple's cat while they're away. The man and woman of the couple separately begin using the vacationing couple's apartment as an escape from their own existence – even to rifling through pictures, scanning the medicine cabinet for drugs, and dressing up in the vacationing couple's clothing. As the couple happily discovers each other's habit of using the apartment for escape, they accidently leave the key inside and lock themselves out, thus cutting themselves out of a place that had become their daily diversion. The themes of tabloid escapism, voyeurism, and the inability to be satisfied with one's own life resonate throughout the story. A student, however, may have some difficulty finding these themes in the story as they require some empathy with the character's situation. Simple
reflective assignments like composing a diary as one of the members of the voyeuristic couple giving their reasons for spending time in their neighbor’s apartment will allow the student to discover the theme easily. Like the bridle, Carver combines symbols and themes frequently: a huge trout symbolizing accomplishment in "Nobody Said Anything," water as danger and guilt in "So Much Water Close to Home," and the "Cathedral" as spiritual insight. Most of Carver's tales can be used to elicit conversations about theme, symbol, and plot and Carver's variety in tales and ways of telling them makes instruction in them and other elements of storytelling boundless.

Finally, Carver's *Collected Stories* have an excellent advantage over other texts: it can be used to teach editing in a way that challenges ESL students in their own writing. One interesting claim about Carver that some critics make is that "Carver owes his career to his editor," Gordon Lish (Hemmingson 480). Lish, fiction editor at *Esquire* at the time, became the link between Carver and his audience, though Lish heavily edited Carver's works while promoting him as a new style of fiction (Stull 40-42). Carver's fame grew progressively with every story released, and after his death in 1988, some were calling him the "American Chekhov" (Kemp). One element of editing that Lish employed, changing elements of the plot to create different outcomes, can be taught easily through comparison of "The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing," stories that both feature an anxious couple whose young son is in the hospital after being hit by a car on his birthday. Carver's move away from Lish's editorial control of content shows clearly after the reader explores the earlier published story "The Bath," which displays Lish's desire for a terse plot and an open-ended conclusion, and its stark difference with Carver's longer, deeply emotional, and redemptive ending of "A Small, Good Thing," a version published later that Lish abhorred. Students may be shocked to find that though the publication of "A Small, Good Thing" postdates "The Bath" by a decade, it was actually an earlier draft of "The Bath": Lish edited away half of Carver's story before publication (Stull 44, 45). Additionally, the students should enjoy comparing the stories of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, all which were edited by Lish, to *Beginners*, which are restored or earlier drafts of the stories of *What We Talk About*… before they were edited for publication. "Note on the Texts," one of the final parts of *Collected Stories* analyzes different elements in the two texts, such as biographical information about Carver and its effect on the text, letters between Lish and Carver, and a tremendously helpful section detailing the exact word amount that Lish cut to make the material in *Beginners* into *What We Talk About*. The difference between the two collections should elicit many conversations about theme and plot, and make great material for
papers dealing with why one version is better than another and so on. Ultimately, *Collected Stories* allows the student and the instructor the ability to fully explore Carver’s oeuvre, and additional texts, such as "On Writing," "My Father’s Life," and "Author’s Note to Where I’m Calling From" expand on Carver’s opinions about writing and editing.

Lish’s vision of editing is so extreme, yet so independent of Carver’s that instructors can attempt to teach the process Lish took with Carver’s work: cutting what he saw as clutter interrupting the true meaning of the story. Lish’s interest was what was left unsaid, cutting "simple words to whole paragraphs to whole pages" (Monti 63). If an instructor were to take a longer story from *Beginnings*, such as "Where is Everyone?" and assign the student to obliterate at least half of the story’s content while attempting to retain the theme of loneliness and despair due to the narrator’s alcoholism, the student would be faced with a challenging task of interacting with attempting to preserve the plot of the story while deleting things that he deemed unnecessary. This not only deepens the students’ understanding of text as an organic, ever able-to-be-changed canvas of words, but also heightens the students’ awareness of their own use of clutter and "filler words" — words written because they are part of the their grammatical framework, but unnecessary to their composition’s meaning. To conclude, students can compare their own work with Lish’s "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit," and note the similarities and differences between Lish’s editing and their own.

While these examples of instructing dialogue, theme, and editing through Carver are excellent ways to help the ESL student reach a deeper understanding of English, other applications available to instruction through the stories are limitless. Haruki Murakami, famed novelist and Japanese translator of Carver’s collections, claims that Carver’s writings, "turns readers into writers" because "his stories are our own" (qtd. in "Library" 1). Instructors could assign students to write their own short stories in Carver’s voice, and the variety of exercises available to be assigned involving cutting clutter, finding symbols, and imitating Carver’s ability to turn mundane situations into something magical are incalculable. Fundamentally, a good reader is a good writer, and students should be urged to challenge themselves with writing fiction. As an example, there is Raymond Carver’s creative completion of John Cheever’s "The Five-Forty-Eight," "The Train."

A fun assignment for instructors of ESL would also be to allow their students to create an ending to an open-ended Carver story as an exercise in comprehension and composition. Students also could see how Carver’s stories transfer easily from the written page to the movie.
screen, inspiring films that deal with individual stories (Jindabyne springing from "So Much Water So Close to Home" and Everything Must Go from "Why Don't you Dance") as well as Short Cuts, which visually retells many of his short stories. Students could also be given assignments in using video to make their own film adaptations of Carver's short stories. The only caveat to teaching Carver, and this is directed to instructors of students with cultures sensitive to depictions of sex, drug use, and alcohol, is that Carver's work is very candid about these subjects and sometimes difficult for students to accept. I would recommend carefully reading the stories before a syllabus is constructed. Otherwise, the stories should instruct surprisingly well. Perhaps due to my own time limitations in reading through research I was unable to find an article linking Carver to the ESL classroom, but I do hope that instructors will experiment with using his stories in the classroom and that, perhaps, some more research will be written about his stories and their usefulness in instruction. He simultaneously embodies both a view of America that is sincere and gritty, and uses exacting English in order to express his view of the world. It has an honesty that no student should miss.

Works Cited


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