“It All Fell in on Him”:
Masculinities in Raymond Carver’s Short Stories and American Culture during the 1970s and 1980s

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This article locates Carver’s stories in the context of discourses of masculinity predominant in American culture during the 1970s and 1980s. During these decades, traditional constructions of masculinity were increasingly questioned, creating spaces for alternative forms of masculinity. This essay also locates a transformation in representations of masculinity in Carver’s oeuvre: representations of masculinity in crisis are transformed in later stories into alternate constructions of masculinity characterized by optimism and growth. This essay concludes that Carver’s stories provide a window into the intense gender conflict of these decades.

Keywords: Raymond Carver, masculinity, American Culture 1970s-1980s, gender in American literature, American studies

In 1971, Esquire published Raymond Carver’s “Neighbors,” the most explicitly sexual, even deviant, of his stories. The story’s central characters, Bill and Arlene Miller, are vaguely dissatisfied with their lives and envious of their friends, whom they believe “lived a fuller and brighter life” (p. 9). While cat-sitting for their neighbors, the Millers recharge their sexual lives by imaginatively changing identities. On the pretext of feeding the Stones’ cat, Bill secretly rifles through and consumes his neighbors’ possessions; he even goes as far as to try on Harriet Stone’s clothing, although he stopped at her shoes as he “understood they would not fit” (p. 14). At the end of the story, Bill realizes his wife has had similar adventures in the Stones’ apartment. The story ends when the Millers, attempting to enter the Stones’ apartment together this time to view “some pictures,” realize that Arlene has accidentally locked them out. This recognition momentarily paralyzes them, and Bill comforts Arlene whose “lips were parted, and her breathing was hard, expectant” (p. 16).
The publication of “Neighbors” in Esquire proved to be Carver’s break into the literary mainstream, introducing themes that would preoccupy much of his writing: dissatisfaction with everyday life and a resulting voyeurism and dissociation, an attraction to (gender, sexual, class, racial) “otherness,” sexual crisis. While the crisis in “Neighbors” results from the Millers being literally blocked from the terrain of their sexual fantasies and flirtation with otherness, the events of the story, and particularly Bill’s cross-dressing, signal a larger thematic preoccupation. Kirk Nessett (1995) confirmed this: “again and again in Carver, the crisis [his male characters confront] hinges on sex” (p. 23). These sexual crises take different forms in Carver’s stories, but, particularly in his stories from the 1970s, revolve around a male character’s fears of his wife’s sexual infidelity; this forms the theme of some of his strongest stories in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976). In “What’s In Alaska,” Carl fears that something is going on between his wife and his friend Jack (1976d); in “What Is It?,” Leo fears his wife has sold her body for a good price on their car (1976e); and in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”, Ralph discovers that his wife had an affair several years earlier (1976f). This discovery prompts Ralph’s journey through bars filled with dangerous “Negroes,” “frightening” women, and assorted symbols of cuckoldry.

While men’s preoccupation with their wives’ fidelity is not in itself historically remarkable, the general threat of emasculation in other Carver stories is more historically specific. The sexual crises Carver’s male characters face, while deeply rooted in traditional gender relations and literary conventions, do more than “ultimately reflect a kind of [ahistorical] fortune and fate which, forever unseen and unheard, dictate the bleak circumstances of their lives,” as Nessett claimed (1995, p. 11). Carver’s portrayals of male sexual insecurities, the “deep symbolic concern with emasculation” that Ewing Campbell (1992) also noted (p. xi), span Carver’s writing and reference a larger cultural upheaval in gender relations occurring in the 1970s; masculinity critic Michael Kimmel, in Manhood in America (1996) termed this cultural transformation a “growing crisis of masculinity” (p. 290). Barbara Ehrenreich in her 1983 book, The Hearts of Men, traced the multiple cultural transformations contributing to what she terms, “the male revolt ... against the breadwinner ethic” (p. 13). Carver’s stories reflect this massive shift away from “normative masculine identity” occurring in American society and culture during the 1970s (Savran, 1998, p. 194).

In this essay, I analyze Carver’s stories in relationship to dominant cultural discourses surrounding masculinity in the 1970s and 1980s. Traditional ideas and myths of manhood were drawn into question in the 1970s, largely a consequence of shifting gender ideologies—“scathing critiques of traditional masculinity” offered by feminist and other social movements of 1960s and 1970s (Kimmel 1996, p. 271)—but also a result of economic restructuring; more women entered the workforce out of necessity. As Ehrenreich’s book demonstrated, however, it was not just feminist agitation and economic restructuring that contributed to gender role transformation, but also a deep dissatisfaction men felt with traditional gender roles and the pressures to conform to a set role of “mature” husband, father, and economic provider. A variety of social and cultural factors contributed to many men’s abandonment of traditional gender expecta-
tions, including discoveries of the supposed impact of stress on men’s health, the loosening ties between so-called “effeminacy” in men and homosexuality, and changing ideals of human development. For example, according to the Human Growth Movement, which became influential in the early 1970s, marriage could function as an obstacle to individual growth; “Divorce, then, no longer signaled a ‘failed marriage’ but an accomplished growth opportunity” ( Ehrenreich, 1983, pp. 96-97 ). Chris Bullock (1994), the only critic to date who has offered a sustained analysis of masculinity in Carver’s stories, also observed that Carver’s “heroes are concerned with dilemmas of masculine identity” (p. 343).

This essay focuses on Carver’s constructions of crisis in masculinity, locating a shift in Carver’s preoccupations between his 1970s collection, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? and his 1980s collections: Cathedral, and Where I’m Calling From. Although some of Carver’s best stories are narrated from a female perspective, the majority of Carver’s stories are narrated from a white, male perspective. Consistently attuned to the limitations of traditional gender roles, Carver’s stories still demonstrate a shift in sensibility and preoccupation; broadly speaking, representations of masculinity in crisis are transformed in some later stories into attempts to construct alternative, positive versions of masculinity, a rarity in American literature, as James Riemer (1987) argued in “Rereading American Literature from a Men’s Studies Perspective.” These transformations were prompted by cultural, in addition to biographical, changes. As Carver’s stories sort through the various versions and meanings of masculinity in the 1970s and 1980s, they capture a fuller understanding of the intense gender conflict portrayed and experienced by American men during these decades.

Carver’s frank portrayals of family dysfunction were certainly jarring even to a late-twentieth-century audience, but they were nevertheless not as unique as G. P. Lainsbury (2004) implies. Although he claimed that “this is not the kind of thing we are used to hearing about families (p. 122),” 1970s and 1980s American culture was permeated by narratives puncturing the myth of the nuclear family as a safe, nurturing place for many people. Significantly, dysfunction in the nuclear family was not primarily the result of an upset to traditional family structures triggered by feminism and the civil rights movement, as conservative critics continue to argue; dysfunction in the nuclear family has always existed, as Carver’s own biography reveals. Carver’s own childhood, spanning the 1940s and 1950s, was far from ideal: physical abuse, psychological distress, and poverty characterized his experiences. The significant difference between pre- and post-1970s discourses involving the nuclear family is that feminism and the civil rights movements created discursive spaces in which family dysfunction could be revealed, discussed, and treated as indicative of systemic, rather than solely individual, factors. In particular, Carver’s bewilderment and dissatisfaction with the major male roles of his lifetime—son, husband, father, provider—resonated with his contemporaries. His stories would have struck a responsive chord in those of his readers who were also wrestling with issues of masculine identity.

Carver’s ambivalence toward traditional masculine roles stemmed from his cultural positioning, in addition to the individual aspects of his biography. His experience and
perspective fit into a larger confluence of discourses concerning masculinity in the 1970s and 1980s. In his discussion of blue-collar images in film, John Bodnar (2003) noted that “lonely and angry men dominated the period’s imagination” (p. 231). Like many mainstream cultural texts of his day, Carver’s stories are obsessed with wounded masculinity. Campbell (1992) noted that this concern spans Carver’s publications: “Pastoral,” composed at the beginning of his career, [and] “Blackbird Pie,” at the end, share a deep symbolic concern with emasculation” (p. xi).

Understanding white men as being engaged in, and not outside of, the struggle over cultural politics needs to be central to men’s studies. It is far more accurate and useful than imagining them as operating above the realm of struggle over cultural and political resources, a distortion that enables irresponsible attacks on women, nonwhites, and gays for their use of identity politics to further their quest for full citizenship, which until that past three or four decades, belonged almost exclusively to white men. White men and discourses of wounded white masculinity are very much engaged in this struggle, as both Sally Robinson (2000) and David Savran demonstrated (1998).

Carver’s stories both participate in and critique narratives of wounded white masculinity. Carver’s first major publications illustrate this by their position within a publication invested in diagnosing and treating male dilemmas. Treating masculine sexual and identity crises within seemingly personal contexts, Esquire’s “Neighbors” and “What Is It?” are sandwiched between articles on feminism’s effect on male sexuality and sex roles; male sexuality, otherness, and emasculation were ongoing preoccupations in Esquire. Philip Nobile’s 1972 Esquire essay, “What Is the New Impotence, and Who’s Got It?” speculated whether a new, widely discussed male impotence is a result of feminism (the “new impotence”). Stephen Koch’s 1975 Esquire essay, “The Guilty Sex,” treated criticism of male sex roles with ambivalence, concluding “one hardly knows if there are more grounds for hope or despair in the fact that we will never again be the way we were” (p. 156). In this article, a sense of diminishment resulting from the perception of a bygone heroic masculinity, akin to what Carver’s portrayal of Mr. Harrold in his early story “Pastoral” represents, was combined with a relief that confines of traditional (violent, competitive, aggressive, stoic, confining) masculinity might also be averted.

While Carver’s earlier stories reveal regret over masculine diminishment, this regret over bygone heroic masculinity all but vanishes in his later stories. Masculinity is as problematic a construct as ever in his later stories. However, as Carver’s critique of traditional gender roles sharpens over the course of his writing, instead of looking regretfully at the past, his sense of nostalgia diminishes and is replaced with attempts to envision new models of masculinity.

Shifting norms in masculine roles and gendered power relations likely proved difficult for some men to navigate, but it is notable that these transformations were so often figured, as Robinson (2000) argued in Marked Men, as a crisis (11). In Taking It Like a Man, Savran (1998) also identified portraits of beleaguered white masculinity, tracing the “genealogy of the fantasy of the white male as victim” throughout the second half of the twentieth century (p. 4). Originating in the dissident masculinities of the
Beats, Savran argues, “a marginalized and dissident masculinity ... has become increasingly central and hegemonic in U.S. culture” (p. 5). Although white masculinity is generally understood as normative, and as being particularly powerful because of its invisibility, Robinson’s and Savran’s analyses of masculinity in the latter portion of the twentieth century illustrate that this is only partially true. Robinson (2000) qualified, “Invisibility is a privilege enjoyed by social groups who do not, thus, attract modes of surveillance and discipline, but it can also be felt as a burden in a culture that appears to organize itself around the visibility of differences and the symbolic currency of identity politics” (p. 3).

Asking “Why is it that when dominant masculinity becomes visible, it becomes visible as wounded?”, Robinson (2000) argued that “[i]n order for white masculinity to negotiate its position within the field of identity politics, white men must claim a symbolic disenfranchisement” (p. 12). However perverse it may seem, claiming victim status, then, enables them to claim a space in the field of identity politics, what Robinson termed an “identity politics of the dominant” (p. 12). The trope of white male victimization took a virulently politicized turn in the 1970s. During this decade, “a crucial historical shift” took place as the victories of progressive movements of the 1960s resulted in a concrete gains for women and minorities (Savran, 1998, p. 37). Perceiving these transformations in gender and race power relations as “seemingly concerted attacks on [white, male] normativity,” white masculinities went on the defensive (Robinson, 2000, p. 4). As a result, discourses of masculinity in the 1970s through the present are shaped in relationship to a virulent political backlash to these gains; this backlash, triggered in the 1960s, gained momentum in the 1970s in discourses surrounding the “Silent Majority,” achieving full fruition during the Reagan years. Putting a “happy face” on America meant restoring a virile white masculinity to center stage in American politics and culture; images of “the disenfranchised white man [became] a symbol for the decline of the American way” (Robinson, 2000, p. 3). That white manhood was “idealized as representative [American] identity” is nothing new in U.S. history, as Dana Nelson (1998) demonstrated in National Manhood (p. 28).

Carver’s stories do not explicitly reference this discourse of white, male disenfranchisement. Representations of white masculinity in Carver’s stories contrast with portrayals of a besieged white masculinity, such as those found in John Updike’s popular Rabbit novels. Particularly in the second novel of Updike’s four-novel series, Rabbit Redux (1971), the protagonist, Rabbit Angstrom, is openly confronted and disempowered by racial and gender threats. Robinson (1998) noted in her essay “‘Unyoung, Unpoor, Unblack’: John Updike and the Construction of Middle American Masculinity” that Rabbit Redux, published in the earlier 1970s, is situated “at the very beginning of an era marked by a crisis in the symbolic (if not social) position of white masculinity” (p. 342). Robinson noted that Updike’s novels “both reflect and feed the growing crisis in white masculinity announced in the discourses around the discovery of Middle America” (Robinson, 1998, p. 358). While not explicitly referenced as in Updike’s novels, the general threat, or crisis encountered by Carver’s male characters intersects with many discourses on wounded masculinity permeating American culture.
during the 1970s and early 1980s, lending Carver’s stories a currency among his readers, as well as historical relevance. Carver’s ability to tap into these mainstream discourses, even as he problematizes them, renders his stories of particular value to those trying to gain a deeper understanding of these decades.

Carver’s life spanned decades in the twentieth century when masculinity underwent considerable attention and revision. Growing up in a working-class environment in Yakima, Washington, Carver engaged in conventional masculine activities: fishing, hunting, and reading popular men’s magazines including Argosy and True (1987a, “After the Fire” p. 214). Eschewing any hint of feminine influence, True, in particular, marketed a hyper-masculine image. True’s frequently misogynistic editorials and features trumpeted men’s “primacy” as economic providers and pursuers of fish, game, and women (Pendergast, 2000, p. 234). Tom Pendergast argued that True’s working-class readers particularly enjoyed the authenticity and voyeuristic thrills the “true” story format provided: “The titles of True stories most often began ‘I Was’ or ‘I Saw’; the numerous photos accentuate the most lurid or risqué details of the story, exposing a woman’s breast or a gaping wound” (p. 223). Carver’s own signature style may owe something to these magazines. His stories often begin similarly in the first person—“I’ve seen some things,” “I was,” “I could hear.” The implicit claim of narrative authenticity as well as voyeuristic proximity contained in these openings proved to be popular with True’s working-class readership. However, rather than affirming “The Power of Man,” as a popular cartoon “defending real manhood” was titled in True, Carver’s stories instead provide spectacles of masculine failure (Pendergast, 2000, p. 235).

In some stories, Carver employs traditionally American masculine settings and symbols, but subverts their conventional significance. In “Pastoral,” published in the small press collection, Furious Seasons (1977), a man’s weekend fishing retreat turns into a humiliating disaster when some boys, “little bastards from that trailer camp downriver,” threaten him with a gun when he refuses to tell them in what direction an injured deer went that the boys had maimed with their gun: “The barrel pointed somewhere at his stomach, or lower down maybe, his groin, or his balls. He felt them contract” (p. 89). As Mr. Harrold leaves the river to go home, he forgets his “rod,” losing symbolically his masculinity and abandoning the heroic fantasies with which he began the trip to the river. Lainsbury (2004) views this story as a “kind of ironic homage to Hemingway’s ‘Big Two-Hearted River’” (p. 43). Rather than functioning as a restorative escape and masculine refuge as does the wilderness in Hemingway’s oeuvre, the wilderness in Carver’s stories is degraded (p. 43).

Although Lainsbury traced the connection of the end of the frontier mythology and environmental destruction to the degraded wilderness setting of “Pastoral,” he doesn’t link it to a kind of “vanishing” masculinity or a nostalgia for a masculine wholeness witnessed in currents of late twentieth-century American culture. Robert Bly’s “men’s movement” is certainly the most sensational example from this period of male yearning for the wilderness as a sight of ritualized male bonding and masculinity formation. Previously known for his explorations of the unconscious mind in what came to be
termed his “deep image” poetry and for his anti-Vietnam war activities, Bly began, in 1981, “leading weekend retreats for men in which, by sharing diverse rituals, they would, he hoped, be able to get in touch with what he calls ‘the deep masculine’” (Savran, 1998, p. 169). Bly’s movement was trying to revive a version of primitive, essential masculinity that has received rigorous critiques since the 1970s.

Published originally while Carver was a student at Humboldt in 1963/1976 in the Western Humanities Review, “Pastoral,” Carver’s parody of Hemingway’s fishing stories, anticipates the breakdown of traditional masculine genres and forms in the 1970s. John Boorman’s (1972) film, Deliverance, based on James’ Dickey’s 1970 novel, charts the breakdown of traditional masculinities—even within that traditional masculine haven, the wilderness—seven years after Carver’s initial publication of “Pastoral.” Released in 1972, before Carver’s stories gained mainstream recognition, the film, like Carver’s story, recasts an outdated narrative to fit the preoccupations of its time. James Dickey’s novel Deliverance was published only two years before the film, yet, as Robinson (2000) pointed out, the novel “enshrines an age-old narrative about the damage inflicted on white men from a ‘civilizing’ culture that tamps down, or represses, men’s ‘nature’” (p. 19). The movie, however, “constructs a much more contemporary, historicized narrative about a white masculinity in perpetual and unresolvable crisis.” Robinson (2000) asserted that the crisis in Boorman’s film is caused by “competing constructions of masculinity in post-liberationist culture [that] paralyze men, and produce a hysterical male body as evidence of that paralysis” (p. 19).

Boorman’s emphasis in the film is on the hysterical male body as a product of masculine crisis. Deliverance critiques masculine wilderness conventions and foregrounds vivid displays of violence. The masculinity the four Atlanta businessmen experience in the wilderness is not strengthening or ennobling, but debased and fragmenting. The most infamous scene in the film, in which a local backwoodsman rapes one of the businessmen, accentuates the film’s emphasis on emasculation; the wilderness in the film is no longer a masculine refuge but quite the opposite. Carver’s stories, like “Pastoral,” also portray a violated, rather than violent, masculinity. However, Carver’s attitude toward revisions of traditional masculinity seems conflicted in his stories, combining a sense of loss like Mr. Harrold feels in “Pastoral,” a feeling that “somehow he had missed .... something heroic,” with an awareness that traditional masculinity—as Boorman’s Deliverance implies also—is dangerously flawed (“Pastoral,” (1963/1976a), p. 91).

Even as “traditional genres,” like the masculine wilderness genre, that relied on formulaic gender convention began to “break down” in the 1970s, as Kimmel demonstrated, new gender types emerged (Freeman, 1993, p. 736). Although many of Carver’s characters are working-class white men, they display little resemblance to stock masculine types emerging in the seventies, such as the popular hardhat image, which endured in part because it resonated with a crisis of middle-class masculinity: “white, ethnic working-class ... was portrayed for better or for worse, as the last enclave of traditional manliness” (Freeman, p. 736). The hardhat image was a defensive posture assumed in politics (originally by Richard Nixon) and popular culture to shore up a
beleaguered traditional masculinity (the contemporary political equivalent is Senator John McCain’s “Joe the Plumber”). Representing a rebellion from gender conventions, the “longhair” or hippie represented the antithesis of the hardhat.

Carver’s stories generally avoid the stereotypes commonly attached to divergent forms of masculinity in the 1970s. However, when Carver’s stories do infrequently reference stock male figures, these representations function as send-ups of traditional masculine behaviors; they include Carver’s ironic treatment of the postman narrator in “What Do You Do in San Francisco” and an unemployed salesman in “They’re Not Your Husband.” “What Do You Do in San Francisco” opens with the narrator’s, Henry Robinson’s, assertion: “This has nothing to do with me” (1976c, p. 111). This claim immediately sets up the narrator as unreliable; it quickly becomes clear that the narrator’s suspicions about the “beatnik” and his wife who have just moved into his town, and who form the focus of postman’s narration have, in fact, everything to do with him and his prejudices. The second paragraph, in fact, indicates that the narrator is obsessed with the question of masculinity and identity: “I’m not a frivolous man, nor am I, in my opinion, a serious man. It’s my belief a man has to be a little of both these days. I believe, too, in the value of work—the harder the better. A man who isn’t working has got too much time on his hands, too much time to dwell on himself and his problems (p. 111). The narrator’s claims reflect a severe lack of self-awareness. We discover through the course of the story that the postman tries to compensate for his lack of a personal life by prying into the lives of others.

As Arthur Saltzman noted (1988), this couple from San Francisco clearly incites the postman’s interest, “for they simply do not fit into the well-defined expectations of this staunchly working-class community” (p. 48). Over the course of the story, the postman imagines the “beatnik” as a potential murderer and his wife—whom he only meets once, briefly, as both a “dope addict” and a poor “wife and mother”; this observation is immediately followed by the observation that “[s]he was a painter” (presumably exempting her from the realm of good mothers) (pp. 116, 112). By the 1970s, when this story was published, the “marginalized and dissident masculinity of the 1950s” that the term “beatnik” references, had “become increasingly central and hegemonic in U.S.,” labels notwithstanding (Savran, 1998, p. 5). The narrator’s use of this term, then, dates both him and the version of masculinity he represents: sexist, repressed, oblivious, narrow-minded. Carver’s story thus functions as an ironic send-up of small town life and traditional gender ideals.

In “They’re Not Your Husband,” an out-of-work man tries to compensate for his lack of power by trying to force his wife to lose weight (1976b). As the title indicates, the story addresses humorously and somewhat painfully through the protagonist, Earl, the role of a “husband.” The story begins with Earl Ober sitting in the coffee shop where his wife is a waitress, witnessing two businessmen insult both his wife (her figure) and him (his taste in women). Rather than dismissing their insults, Earl instead assumes their perspective. The clear reason for his ensuing obsession with his wife’s weight, as the story reveals, is that his masculinity is very fragile: out of work, and dependent on his wife’s wages, he is unable to fulfill a traditional husband’s role. Having
lost power as an economic provider in their relationship, Earl tries to literally gain control over his wife’s body; bullying her into losing weight, despite her co-workers’ fears that she is losing “too much weight” and that she no longer has much energy (p. 27). At the end of the story, Earl’s attempts to solicit masculine approval backfire. Trying to solicit a male customer’s approval of his wife’s new figure, Earl is ignored by the customer, and recognized by his wife, the customer he was trying to impress, and his wife’s co-workers as a “joker.” In Carver’s stories, figures representing controlling, outdated notions of masculinity generally provoke laughter and suspicion and appear only as minor characters in later stories.

Most components of identity have a culturally-inscribed “ideal” that, however problematic, conditions how people evaluate themselves. Gender may cause more discomfort than other components of identity because it is more malleable; it is easier to shape, than one’s class or race. Even so, the extent to which dissatisfaction was expressed about traditional gender roles in the 1970s was remarkable. With the exception of an implicit nostalgia in his earlier stories over a bygone heroic, romantic masculinity, most of Carver’s treatments of masculinity contain either implicit or explicit criticism. Foregrounding wounded white masculinity in the dominant culture came to represent the national crises during the 1970s. In the 1980s, however, political and cultural fascination with wounded white manhood faded. However, representations of wounded masculinity in Reagan’s relentlessly optimistic America quickly became out of place.

Carver’s stories tapped into the predominant mood of crisis in American culture; however by the 1980s, after he had achieved national literary prominence, his stories bucked the forced optimism of Reagan’s America, prompting criticism from right-wing reviewers, who, Carver claimed in an interview, implied that he was “rather un-American for bringing these stories to public attention” (Carver, 1987b, “Fiction and America” p. 212). However, Carver’s later stories, particularly those in Cathedral and Where I’m Calling From, were also in significant ways thoroughly mainstream, even arguably conservative, employing discourses of sentimentality in ways that went unremarked by contemporary reviewers (likely because they were so common).

The transformations in Carver’s stories were triggered primarily by his cultural positioning, and his ability to tap into and convey cultural anxieties and preoccupations. The trend toward sentimentalism in Carver’s later stories demonstrates what Campbell (1992) notes is “Carver’s exploitation of persistent American myths” (p. 60). Campbell also notes the “cultural shift toward sentimentality that characterizes the decade of the eighties” (p. 49). He claims that Carver’s stories “provide excellent opportunities to note the retrieval of sentimentality and religious melodrama from the storehouse of cultural assumptions and the restoration of their aesthetic value during the 1980s” (p. 48).

Carver’s use of sentimentalism is attached to his treatment of masculinity, and, as in the wider culture, it can perform a conservative function. In 1978, Time columnist Frank Trippett heralded the return of sentimentalism in popular culture in language extolling a new romanticism in the United States. Lauren Berlant (2002) examined “na-
tional sentimentality” during the Reagan era, arguing that sentimentalism (patriotic feeling/servor) “makes citizenship into a category of feeling irrelevant to practices of hegemony or sociality in everyday life” (p. 11). Cultural sentimentalism was tied to the new conservative ascendance; sentimentality tends to require an inward focus and was thus linked to a politically motivated disinclination to criticize the United States or remain in social movements. “A Small, Good Thing” relies on sentimentalism to achieve its resolution, and in the process, engages conventions integral to that most sentimental of genres, the soap opera. The wild popularity of soap operas was only one manifestation of the culture’s turn to sentimentalism.

Carver’s (1983a) “A Small, Good Thing”—his most widely discussed “optimistic” work—features such a cast of mainstream 1980s characters, seemingly unmarked by any wider social conflicts. In his discussion of Cathedral, Campbell identifies preoccupations and characters common to soap operas in Carver’s “A Small, Good Thing.” The most clearly sentimental of Carver’s stories, Campbell (1992) points out, “A Small Good Thing” contains stock soap opera characters—a handsome doctor, an elegant, WASPy couple, their tragically injured son. In soap operas, fate is often the only explanation for hardship, as the father (Mr. Weiss) contemplates: “So far, he had kept away from any real harm, from those forces he knew existed and that cripple or bring down a man if the luck went bad, if things suddenly turned” (p. 62). Even the story’s language simulates television viewing: the story is narrated in the third person—the son is called “the birthday boy” repeatedly before he’s struck by the car—and there are vivid character descriptions (for Carver) of characters. Although part of the story’s power is that it promotes the reader’s sensation of viewing the events from a distance, which simulates the feeling of distance that accompanies severe shock provoked by tragedy, there is evidence that Carver also encourages the comparison between the story and television: “She heard herself say that and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sort of words used on TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths. She wanted her words to be her own” (p. 81). The language at Ann Weiss’s disposal is inadequate and trite, a reflection of the unspeakableness of her tragedy, but also a reference to people’s inability to transcend the cultural discourses in which they are enmeshed.

The inward focus of sentimentalism has an inherently conservative effect, directing focus to personal, rather than political, problems. By almost exclusively focusing on the inner struggles of white middle- or upper-class characters, dominant cultural texts of the 1980s rendered invisible those lives whose experiences validated serious critique of U.S. society. A new sentimental patriotism was embodied in the rugged, traditional masculinity represented by Rocky, Rambo, Diehard, and these films’ many offshoots. Backlash to the many cultural transformations of the 1960s and 1970s was evidenced by white upper- and middle-class dominance of mainstream culture. Country music became increasingly popular; yearning for traditional values, exuberant patriotism and sentimentalism increasingly dominated the airwaves countrywide; syrupy sentimentalism blended with devout patriotism reached its zenith (or nadir, depending on your perspective) in Lee Greenwood’s chart-topping, “Proud to Be an American,”
a campaign song for Reagan and winner of the Country Music Award in 1985. Soap operas also achieved enormous audiences during the 1980s, “about eighty million each week” (Johnson, 2003, p. 146). Dallas, a glossy evening soap opera, was the most popular television show in the 1980s (Johnson, p. 145).

Stripped of the reactionary political content and waging stars andstripes found in some popular genres, the sentimental treatment of traditional family structures prominently displayed in much 1980s popular culture is echoed in some of Carver’s stories from the 1980s, and quite prominently in “A Small, Good Thing.” When the Weiss’s son dies after waking briefly, they return home, where they are plagued by repeated phone calls from a baker; he is angry that they did not come pick up and pay for the cake they ordered for their son’s birthday. Going to the bakery with the intention of confronting the baker about his behavior, they find the baker willing to apologize when he hears their story. The story closes with them eating the baker’s bread, and listening to his sad story; they are all able to find comfort in each others’ presence. The ending employs the conventions of sentimentalism, in particular a death/tragedy (the child’s) followed by regeneration (the baker’s). We learn that the baker’s problem is that he doesn’t “know how to act anymore” (p. 88). He confesses that this is a result of his loneliness. Carver’s employment of sentimentalism, then, has several conservative implications: divorcing the subject of representation from its socio-political context and employing a nostalgic sentimentalism for traditional gender roles.

Yet, sentimentalism in Carver’s stories as in soap operas can function more critically. In his later stories, Carver seems to wittingly reference soap operas; in his late story, “Menudo”—a story centered around the male narrator’s infidelity—the narrator observes: “it struck me that what we were saying—the tense, watchful expressions we wore—belonged to the people on afternoon TV programs that I’d never done more than switch on and then off” (1986, p. 456). Soap operas are obsessed with gender relations and sexuality. Indeed, Leslie Fielder is quoted in a Time essay (1976) as arguing that soaps are anti-male. “First, they show how men exploit women, and second, in a crisis that men are impotent.” This observation intersects interestingly with Carver’s rendering of male failure and emasculation. Although soap operas are primarily directed to a female audience, which is clearly not the case with Carver’s stories, the sense of masculinity as spectacle, and failure, pervades Carver’s stories.

In several stories, however, Carver’s employment of sentimentalism in relationship to masculine identity has a visionary component. Also noticing that Carver’s protagonists are struggling with issues of identity, Chris Bullock (1994) supported this view, analyzing how Carver portrays “the masculine ego through the metaphor of architecture” in one of Carver’s most acclaimed short stories, “Cathedral.” Although the narrator originally evidences a “defensive” masculinity—one particular manifestation of the beleaguered masculinity charted so far in this essay—Bullock demonstrated how the cathedral that the narrator sketches with the blind man at the chapter’s end provides the possibility that the narrator will embrace a new form of masculinity. He claimed:

The message is that by moving towards the unconscious, the recognition of death, empathy with others, acknowledgement of the value of the di-
mension of spirit, and acceptance of the aid of the feminine, it seems possible to glimpse a masculinity that is based neither on enclosure nor on control by continual vigilance.

I would add to Bullock’s reading of “Cathedral” attention to the story’s sentimentalism. The narrator’s bonding with the blind man over his drawing of the cathedral, during which the blind man holds the top of his hand, is preceded by the narrator’s plaint: “I guess I don’t believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it’s hard. You know what I’m saying?” (1983b, p. 225). The narrator begins the story feeling “sorry for the blind man for a little bit” because he can’t imagine being married to someone who cannot see, or be seen, by their spouse (the blind man’s wife had just died) (p. 231). By the end of the story, the narrator overcomes his prejudices about the blind man, realizing that the blind man possesses a more powerful vision than he does, including such abilities as communication and imagination. The theme of regeneration, also present in “A Small, Good Thing,” through a physically (the blind man) or emotionally (the baker) impaired individual is sentimental, but not conservative or mushy. Carver’s employment of a constructive sentimentalism is even more visible in another story in Cathedral, “Fever.”

Like many of Carver’s stories, “Fever” critiques traditional gender roles and conventions, but goes even further than “Cathedral” in imagining a new masculinity, which is invested in the traditionally feminine task of care giving (1983c). Critical response to “Fever” is mixed; Adam Meyer (1995) called it “one of the most effective and most important” of Carver’s Cathedral stories (p. 140), while Campbell complained that it “sinks into domestic melodrama and suffers from comparison with ‘Cathedral’” (p. 66). “Fever” is the most sentimental of Carver’s stories, explicitly tapping into 1980s dominant cultural sensibilities. Despite the almost supernatural aura that pervades it—there are multiple fairy tale references and almost supernatural intuition—it is peppered with cultural referents and discourses.

“Fever” is uncharacteristically long and developed and traces a high school art teacher’s experiences taking care of his small children, and trying to find child care after his wife of eight years leaves him and their two children for California (p. 158). The plot recounts Carlyle’s several disastrous attempts to find baby sitters when fall comes and he needs to return to teaching. At last, he finds a woman who performs the task admirably. At the end of the story, however, while he is sick, she announces that she and her husband are leaving soon, and he waves goodbye to them, and his former life with his wife, Eileen, whom he seems finally to be able to let go (p. 186).

Thematically, “Fever” reveals Carlyle’s emotional recovery from his wife’s abandonment, and his adaptation to his new role as the primary caregiver for his children. In theme and sentiment, “Fever,” first published in 1983, recalls the classic 1979 film Kramer vs. Kramer, in which a mother (played by Meryl Streep) abandons her husband and child, only to return to attempt to regain custody. The father discovers that fatherhood is much more important than work, and his career falls apart, although the film ends affirmatively for Ted (Dustin Hoffman) when his wife affirms Ted’s importance to their son and gives up the battle for their son. The emphasis in the story is on Car-
lyle’s emotional recovery and acceptance of his wife’s departure, but the sentimental tone of the story, pain and loss he experiences, is reminiscent of the film.

While “Fever” is a sentimental tale of fatherhood and loss, it also fits with discourse surrounding the “new,” more feminine masculinity that surfaced in some cultural and critical texts during the 1970s and 1980s. It also provides a pungent commentary on traditional gender roles; like the wife and mother in Kramer vs. Kramer, who feels that her marriage has destroyed her identity, Eileen in “Fever” leaves to “do something with her talent” and to find happiness. “Fever” is also a revision of the traditional narrative of a woman abandoned by her ambitious husband; that a woman could desire more than marriage and a family was rarely acknowledged in mainstream cultural texts until the 1970s. When looking for someone to take over his wife’s household roles, Carlyle discovers from the employment service that he contacts that “Not many people wanted to do housework and baby-sit” (p. 163).

There is also a fairy tale dimension to the story that enhances Carver’s exploration of gender ideologies. Some of the actors and situations from the stories Carlyle reads his children before bed, “the Brothers Grimm,” appear in “Fever.” Wicked witches in the form of babysitters threaten his children. While one of these babysitters partied with her “hoodlum boyfriends” in Carlyle’s house, a “dog as big as a wolf” threatened his children in the yard outside (p. 160). An unsuccessful applicant for the job had “hairy arms and run-over shoes” and a “tooth missing,” “listened to him talk without asking him a single question about the children—not even their names” (p. 163). Faced with these perils on his journey toward capable fatherhood, Carlyle at last finds a kind “old woman” who takes good care of his children and is surprisingly referred to him by his wife, who seems to intuit difficulties he’s facing and provides reassurance via telephone. In Postmodern Fairy Tales, Christina Bacchilega (1997) explored the various meanings of contemporary retellings of ancient tales, locating a dual conservative and critical impulse in these retellings. She argued that fairy tales are “doubling and double: both affirmative and questioning, without necessarily being recuperative or politically subversive” (p. 22). Some “postmodern tales expose the fairy tale’s complicity with the ‘exhausted’ form and ideologies of traditional Western narrative ... especially as such rules contribute to naturalizing subjectivity and gender” (p. 23).

As Bacchilega argued regarding contemporary retellings of fairy tales, Carver’s employment of fairy tale devices is both “affirmative and questioning” of traditional gender roles. Certainly his witchy babysitters and temporary savior, the “old woman,” Mrs. Webster, who is a model homemaker and babysitter, are stock figures and indicative of the way fairy tales can “showcase” women and “make them disappear at the same time” (Bacchilega, 1997, p. 9). Yet Eileen is a more complex figure; Carlyle is convinced she’s “losing her mind,” and she is somewhat ridiculous with her vague New Age talk of “karma” and use of aphorisms such as “what goes around, comes around” (p. 166). Yet, within the logic of the story, she is correct and proves to have some kind of telepathy or supernatural ability to see into the future. She intuitively Carlyle’s needs and concerns, and counsels him on how to move ahead, even prodding him to be more communicative and turn his “discomfort ... into something useable”; this advice in turn
leads Carlyle to the therapeutic outpouring of his and Eileen's history to Mr. and Mrs. Webster; voicing his experiences in front of a sympathetic audience breaks Carlyle's fever and leads to his acceptance of the present.

Although Carlyle concludes that his wife is clearly "insane" with her advice and predictions, Carver treats her decision to seek individual fulfillment and abandonment of traditional roles with relative sympathy and even grants Eileen's character a visionary capacity (p.182). His treatment of Eileen and criticism of the confines of domesticity for women is not in itself historically remarkable, although women abandoning children to their fathers rarely fare as well in the popular imagination. However, criticism of the institution of marriage and motherhood as repressive for women was pervasive in 1970s and 1980s as a result of the successes of the second wave of feminism in bringing these issues to light, and had even been treated sympathetically by many earlier writers, perhaps most famously by Henrik Ibsen in A Doll House.

The preoccupation of "Fever," however, is a revised masculinity. Echoing a scene from "Cathedral" wherein the narrator allows the blind man to trace his drawing by placing his hand on his, Carlyle also guides one of his students in his watercolor painting class, counseling, "‘You’ve got to work with your mistakes until they look intended’" (p. 172). The ability to constructively deal with difficulty or "mistakes"—rather than allowing problems to diminish them, as do so many of Carver’s characters—characterizes Carver’s revised masculinity; significantly, this revised masculinity necessitates a revision of traditional masculinities. Carlyle’s turn “to his children” at the end of “Fever,” and acceptance that his former life with his wife “had passed,” indicates his ability to adapt and expand his masculine role to include engaged fatherhood (p. 186).

Rather than just portraying masculinity in crisis, as do most of his early stories, Carver also portrays a more expansive masculinity in his two later collections; his representations should be of interest to scholars in men’s studies, which is invested in locating alternative versions of masculinity. Masculinity in some of Carver’s later stories expands to include more traditionally feminine traits, particularly communication and care giving. This occurs notably in “Fever” and “Cathedral,” but also in “Boxes” from Where I’m Calling From—the story closes with the male narrator comforting his troubled mother—and in “Elephant,” also in Where I’m Calling From, in which the narrator makes peace with his role as a distant provider and caregiver for diverse family members. As this essay posits, Carver was in fact attuned to dominant cultural discourses surrounding masculinity in the 1970s and 1980s, and much of his stories’ success relied on his ability to appeal to cultural sensibilities. Carver’s representations of masculinity, however diverse, were opposed to backlash masculinities also prevalent during these decades; Carver’s ability to imaginatively engage with both genders worked against these kinds of depiction.

Carver’s stories don’t reflect primarily a beleaguered, reactionary masculinity or a desire to return to some essential manhood uncorrupted by civilization. Carver instead represents masculinity as a more complex, contested field; particularly in his later stories, he represents changing masculine ideals in a positive light. In “Cathedral” and
“Fever,” Carver accomplished what Riemer (1987) argues is rare in American literature, “positive depictions of men who represent alternatives to those traditional ideals (p. 298). Especially in “Fever,” Carver provides an image of caring, responsible fatherhood. Noting that [f]atherhood in American literature is generally characterized by absence or “patriarchal authority,” Josep Armengol-Carrera (2008) argues that such representations may “contribute as well to rethinking fatherhood in American culture, which is certainly more complex and varied than generally acknowledged” (p. 224).

While Carver never seems to have overcome the limitations of traditional masculine roles with his own family, replicating his own father’s alcoholism, abusiveness, and distance from his children, his stories portray a more hopeful, constructive version of masculinity at odds with the traditional or hopelessly embattled versions of masculinity still dominating representations of masculinity in American culture.

References


