

Carver/New Criticism Lesson

As you look at the Carver stories I've assigned this week and next, keep in mind that I want you to be reading them as New Critics would: we are doing close readings of the text now, and evaluating the success of these stories based on how well Carver has manipulated certain formal literary elements in them, elements like tone, point of view, speaker, irony, symbol and metaphor, syntax and diction. Your task for the next essay due in a few weeks will be to trace one of these formal elements of storytelling through a story of your choosing, describing how the story only comes together (or not) because that element is used effectively. As you begin to do this work this week, I'd like you to consider a few points that I've discussed below.

Firstly, these are wonderfully written stories, so first just try and enjoy them. My favorite is "A Small, Good Thing" - no matter how many times I read it, it just makes me weep. There is so much humanity in that little back room of the bakery in the middle of the night it's heartbreaking. If I had to write about Carver's stories, I would probably choose that one, since I like it and understand it the best. This is what you should be using to guide your own thinking now: which stories do I feel most strongly about, and which ones do I feel like I understand the best what Carver is trying to say?

Remember that we'll be working now for several weeks with Carver and New Criticism, so you'll have time to slowly ease into a focused new critical analysis of his work. But give yourself time for that to happen. As you think about the stories right now, try and focus your thinking around the language, and the structure of the stories. Remember what New Criticism wants us to do, as many of you noted in last week's discussion forum about New Criticism: pay attention to *how* the language is manipulated by the author in order to make a story into something great, something transcendent. Focus on the vocabulary terms introduced in Chapter 3 from *Texts and Contexts* - words like speaker, point of view, tone, irony, diction, ambiguity, tension, and even words like metaphor and symbol. For New Criticism, how well a writer manipulates these formal literary tools or elements will in turn determine how good a story is. So your task now is to choose a few of these terms that seem particularly relevant to one of the Carver stories, and begin thinking about how that particular literary device works to make the story effective and successful. (Remember to look at the two sample student essays that do a new critical examination of a Carver story to see how this kind of analysis should look.)

For example, if writing about the story "Cathedral," I might argue that irony as a formal element, because it's so well handled by Carver, is a critical feature in the story - without the highly ironic ending, the story would not succeed in

transforming itself into what it does at the very end. The success of the story, in fact the beauty of the story, rests entirely on those last few moments when some very unexpected things happen: the blind man teaches the sighted to see; two men, at least one of whom despises the other, hold hands in a darkened living room and tell each other their dreams and wishes; a man, previously closed off, recognizes the possibilities for the first time in a grainy TV image of a cathedral, the very place where prayers are made and answered... These odd turns at the end of the story make the story, and they're highly ironic - seeing a man for all his vulnerabilities, all of his humanity, is not what we would necessarily expect after reading a story about the same guy who, by all accounts, is a very unsympathetic character (he's racist, sexist, has no friends, seems unhappy, drinks too much, etc.). But without those transformative moments at the end of the tale that Carver gives us, the story would have taken us nowhere. So it is in the end Carver's skillful use of irony at the end of the story that resolves all of the tensions and ambiguity that structures so much of the rest of the narrative and brings the close of the story into sharp relief for us, teaching or showing us something profound in the process.

This is how you should begin trying to think about these stories for the next three weeks.