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Carver/New Criticism Essay

Point of View in Carver Stories

Point of view can be used by authors to provide a frame of reference for the reader, giving them the side of the story that the author wants them to see. In "A Small, Good Thing," Raymond Carver directs the story from the point of view of two parents experiencing the loss of their only son. By using characters with limited knowledge as the reader's link to the story, Carver includes readers in the sad event, making us experience the same apprehension, worry, and anger that the parents do. "A Small, Good Thing" ends in a resolution between opposing characters, but Carver effectively uses point of view to make the reader identify with the protagonists' tragedy.

Point of view is an aspect of narrative that New Critics use to examine a piece of literature. In New Criticism, the feelings of the author and the reader are disregarded; instead, the work itself is analyzed. New Critics focus on the author's use of every aspect of a story to understand the unity of the whole. New Criticism came about after the devastation of World War I, where literary critics turned to a more humane past, searching poems and novels for deeper meaning and beauty, eschewing with a vengeance the gritty, desperate post-war realities extant in Europe and America. Works that New Critics focus on are complex poems and stories with multiple levels of meaning and a central ambiguity that needs to be unraveled to reveal hidden "truths." Tone, irony, voice, point of view, metaphor, symbol, and characterization are the aspects of story that New Critics examine in order to "interpret" a story. Authors use point of view to put the reader in a certain state of mind, whether it is that of a character or an omniscient narrator. This can make it impossible to objectively view the story as a third party, instead making the reading a first-hand experience, as is the case in "A Small, Good Thing."

Raymond Carver is a short story writer and poet from the northwestern United States, the bulk of his work published in the 1980s. "A Small, Good Thing" is a longer story from his

collection entitled *Cathedral*, published in 1983. It is a story told from the point of view of two parents whose eight-year-old son is struck by a car on his birthday. During their time waiting at home and in the hospital, they receive repeated harassing phone calls from a baker who has already baked their son's birthday cake but does not know of his untimely accident. When the boy dies after a few days of unconsciousness in the hospital, the parents visit the baker. He feeds them, and they relate to him in his loneliness. In the end, the parents reconcile their hate towards the baker as well as their own feelings of loss.

In order for the story to effectively rally the audience around the protagonists' struggle, Carver's first task is to identify both of the parents as sympathetic characters. Using point of view to accomplish this is a successful way of deflecting the reader from thinking that the story contains mother-father conflict. After Scotty is hospitalized for a day, Ann tells Howard that she began praying for Scotty, suggesting that Howard should start praying too. Her suggestion hints at an inner conflict, that she did not feel that he would pray if she did not tell him too, and that he did not care for their son. After he tells her he had prayed, Ann feels more connected to him. "For the first time, she felt they were together in it, this trouble. She realized with a start that, until now, it had only been happening to her and to Scotty. She hadn't let Howard into it, though he was there and needed all along. She felt glad to be his wife" (68). In showing that Ann felt this, Carver ensures that the reader no longer feels he/she must choose a parent to side with, that whatever they are going through, they are going through together. Later on, the author deepens this invisible connection between the parents by making them one emotionally. "But they seemed to feel each other's insides now, as though the worry had made them transparent in a perfectly natural way" (71). Through this terrible tragedy of losing their son, the Weiss' bond is forged and strengthened, allowing the story to be more readily resolved later on as they bond with the baker. This unification of Ann and Howard Weiss also allows Carver to further exploit the parents' point of view to evoke sympathy from the reader.

Point of view is also a useful tool for playing with what the reader expects in the unfolding plot. At different points in the story, Carver hints that the boy could very well wake up and continue with life and his birthday party, or that he could go into a coma from which he would never awake. As Howard drives home from the hospital the day his son is hit, he reflects that life had been good to him so far. "So far, he had kept away from any real harm, from those forces he knew existed and that could cripple or bring down a man if the luck went bad, and if

things suddenly turned" (62). At this time, the husband is preparing himself for the worst, reasoning with the universe that he had been lucky so far, and that his luck could run out at any moment. By allowing the reader into this train of thought, Carver gives one of the first warning signs that things could end badly for the family and plants the first seeds of anxiety. The doctor's reassurance that it's just shock and not a coma is the (increasingly unrealistic) optimistic side of what could happen to Scotty. Between Howard's realistic outlook and what he and Ann are hearing from the doctor, Carver's obscure mixed messages are leaving the reader in a state of frustration for lack of an omniscient narrator. Before readers even know what's happening, they are pulled into the hospital room along with Ann and Howard, making the accident and the anonymous harassing caller the story's antagonists of the parents but also of us.

Carver quickly turns sympathy for the characters into empathy with effective use of point of view. The difference between feeling for the characters and feeling with them is crucial to the point that Carver tries to illustrate throughout the story. Once the author has control over his audience's emotions, they can no longer objectively think about the story's likely ending, much like parents in this very real situation. This is the key to getting us "inside" the story and feeling the tragic events and being ultimately as surprised and moved as we are at the stories very unexpected and poignant outcome. With every paragraph, the parents get more anxious about the state of their son, and the wait between visits from the doctor to tell them how he is doing seems like ages. When the doctor or a nurse finally does show up, the parents' interrogation yields ambiguous answers that Ann and Howard are forced to be satisfied with. The doctors and nurses are always directly or indirectly vague. When Dr. Francis says "he could wake up any minute now," the lack of medical detail is to an unprofessional extent (69). The nurses are always different and never seem to know what's actually happening, and the only orderlies speak a different language. This ambiguity fosters more frustration in the reader due to the limited knowledge provided by the parents' point of view. Getting inside the doctor's mind and finding out what he really believes will become of Scotty would be satisfying, but Carver keeps us biting our nails next to the hospital bed right next to the parents themselves.

Scotty's last moments and the events that follow are shocking and numbing due to the amount of emotional investment put into play by taking on the parent's perspective along with them. His death is painstakingly broken down into his every action, intensifying its weight and our incredulity at the unspeakable tragedy of it all.

The boy looked at them, but without any sign of recognition. Then his mouth opened, his eyes scrunched closed, and he howled until he had no more air in his lungs. His face seemed to relax and soften then. His lips parted as his last breath was puffed through his throat and exhaled gently through the clenched teeth. (80)

This is the peak of the reader's engagement with the characters' emotions; the feeling of loss is palpable and real. Carver uses point of view as a device to reel his audience into the story for this one instant where he accurately describes the delicate, paced moments of a life-shattering event. After this, the flow of the story becomes disjointed and surreal, giving it the lifelike clarity that comes with post-trauma. With this, the narrative changes to a somber tone, giving the Weisses their needed space to mourn.

When Ann and Howard make up their minds to confront the antagonistic baker, the reader is demanding retribution to such a degree that Carver need not say how the parents feel, because the protagonists' emotions are one with the readers' by this time. However, once Ann's anger dwindles into nothing but sorrow, the baker becomes human very suddenly. As he explains himself and begs for forgiveness, the story's point of view shifts from the Weisses to the baker. "All I can say to you now is that I'm sorry. Forgive me, if you can" (88). Full of remorse and loneliness, the parents of the late boy are able to relate to him, as is the reader. The shift is subtle, but effective in making the reader forgive and empathize with the poor baker. In the final twist of point of view, the focus of aloneness is expanded to another character, deepening the effect on the reader.

By careful control and manipulation of his narrative point of view, Carver is able to lead the reader blindly into conflict, followed by total forgiveness in the story's resolution. If not for the ambiguity and frustration offered by the limited scope of vision allowed us, there would be little emotional impact caused by the death of a child or of the unexpected resolution to the story. The story is so burdened down with worry and anger that the reader is more than ready to unload it by resolving the conflict and forgiving the baker, trying to understand him with an open heart just as the parents so themselves. After the conflict has dissipated, the three characters, as well as the reader, are left with each other in their shared wish to connect with others and overcome the unbearable loneliness that defines this story for so much of the narrative.