
Violent or Healing: An Exploration of the Role of Water in Raymond Carver's Stories

The beautiful Pacific Northwest serves as a perfect backdrop for Raymond Carver's stories, full of recurring symbolism, underlying themes, and significant motifs, most importantly the repeated theme of water. Just as water plays such a significant role in the identity, culture, and nature of the Pacific Northwest, Carver's continued inclusion of the theme in his short stories gives it a similarly significant role, but one that does not necessarily hold the same meaning throughout each story. Water is mentioned in many different forms: melting ice, snow, rivers, rain, and even running water in a bath or a sink. Though the theme of water holds significance in Carver's literature, the role it plays in the respective stories greatly differs. On one hand, in some instances it accompanies and represents violence, but at the same time in other stories, it also exists on the complete opposite end of the spectrum, representing health and healing.

There is almost a universal acceptance of the healing powers of water. Isak Dinesen once wrote, "the cure for anything is salt water: sweat, tears, or the sea." On one hand, this speaks to the seemingly endless forms of water that exist in nature that we experience every day, but it also cites water as a *cure*. Swimming is therapeutic for countless numbers of people, sometimes drinking water is all someone needs to calm down, taking showers or baths can automatically relax and restore.

Carver explores these restorative qualities of water in many of his stories, but he specifically utilizes the theme of water in the form of bathing in "The Bath" (also known in later versions as "A Small, Good Thing"). With this short story, the importance of water is highlighted even just within the title, indicating the significance of the theme. In this story, a mother and father are at the hospital anxiously awaiting their young son's emergence from a coma after getting hit by a car on his birthday. Naturally the story is filled with fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and helplessness, but the idea of water in the form of a bath exists as safe place for both the husband and the wife respectively. While the couple is waiting at the hospital, the narrator focuses on the husband, saying "fear made him want a bath," (Carver 252) which establishes the bath as a place of safety. He returns home, washes his face, shaves, and gets into the bath, hoping it will restore and rejuvenate him, but he is interrupted by one of the many mysterious and aggressive phone calls from the baker of his son's birthday cake. In turn, the wife, Ann, goes home from the hospital later, in the hopes of also taking a bath. She talks to a man in the waiting room on her way out, saying "my son was hit by a car...But he's going to be all right. He's in shock now, but it might be some kind of coma too. That's what worries us, the coma part. I'm going out for a little while. Maybe I'll take a bath...There's a chance everything will change when I'm gone"

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(Carver 257). Here, the bath becomes not only a symbol of health, safety, and rejuvenation for the parents, but also represents possible health of their child. Ann hopes that in the act of her leaving the hospital and going home and taking a bath, her son will in turn finally wake up. In the later version of “The Bath” from *Beginners*, which was renamed “A Small, Good Thing”, Ann, in the same manner that her husband did before he got into his bath, utters the words “I’m scared to death” (Carver 818). This story is a constant cycle of expectation, disappointment and despair, and the bath provides a welcome break from that cycle, representing healing, safety, and comfort.

The story “What’s In Alaska?” also includes a scene involving a bath, and it’s used again as a symbol of comfort and restoration when the character Carl welcomes a bath after a tense interaction with his wife, Mary, who is later suggested in the story as adulterous. There are also other stories that don’t necessarily include baths, but they incorporate the idea of using running water from the sink or from the shower to restore health or experience a feeling of safety and comfort. In “What Is It?” Leo “splashes water on his face” (Carver 163) after a particularly intense and highly charged argument with his partner Toni, in an effort to restore himself after the confrontation. Additionally, in “Fat”, the unnamed narrator takes a shower after she gets home from work, escaping to a comforting place because her relationship with her partner Rudy is unfulfilling, distant, and misunderstood. We can all relate to utilizing water to instill a sense of comfort and health. Few things are more calming or restorative than a hot bath or shower, and even merely splashing water on your face from the sink can be the cure for tiredness or help dissipate any sort of negative feelings. Carver’s frequent use of water is not an accident—he uses it as a purposeful theme representing healing and safety to balance out the many negative thoughts and feelings that come with his stories.

Though water is sometimes used as a balance against the more undesirable qualities of his stories, Raymond Carver also uses water to actually accentuate or represent some of those negative feelings that pervade his literature. Even though I did just spend three pages singing the praises of water, highlighting its healing qualities and the sense of comfort it can instill, water does have another side. I grew up with a family beach house in Tofino, British Columbia on the west coast of Vancouver Island, and I have been surfing there since I was a little girl. One of the first things my dad told me when he taught me was that water would not always be my friend. The ocean is unpredictable, ruthless, and violent, and sometimes fighting it just pulls you further out into a rip tide, crashes you into awaiting rocks, or just swallows you so deep that you end up drowning. Carver sits on opposite sides of a spectrum in his short stories—not only does he explore water as a symbol for health, but he also uses it as a symbol that accompanies violence.

The clearest representation of Carver associating water with violence is in his short story “So Much Water So Close To Home”. Three men on a fishing trip find a woman dead in the river,

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but decide to leave her there and not report it until after their trip is over, waiting several days to pack up their camp and find a phone to call the police. This incident creates a significant disconnect between one of the men, Stuart, and his wife, Claire. As indicated by the title, obviously water plays an incredibly important part in the story, beginning with the fact that the dead woman was found in a river. This almost contaminates the water in a way, associating with death and violence; given that we also know the woman was raped before she was killed. Additionally, while Claire and Stuart are arguing about the incident in the kitchen, Claire (who is the narrator), says “I close my eyes for a minute and hold onto the drainboard...Despite everything, knowing all that may be in store, I rake my arm across the drainboard and send the dishes and glasses smashing and scattering across the floor,” (Carver 865). Even though water is not expressly mentioned in this instance, Claire’s random and instinctive act of violence happens at the drainboard, which is definitely associated with water. Later in the story, Claire and Stuart go for a drive, and end up sitting at a picnic area next to a creek. Watching the creek, Claire finds herself identifying with the woman’s dead body, recounting, “I looked at the creek. I float toward the pond, eyes open, face down, staring at the rocks and moss on the creek bottom until I am carried into the lake where I am pushed by the breeze,” (Carver 870). Another instance where water accompanies the idea of violence is while Claire is driving the harrowing road to the dead woman’s funeral, and a man knocks on her window when she’s pulled over on the shoulder. She’s fearful that she’s going to be raped and killed by this man, just like the woman was, and in that instance she mentions how she “can hear the river somewhere down below the trees,” (Carver 879). Finally, the last significant moment where water comes into play lies at the very end of the story, in the version from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, when Stuart one-sidedly facilitates sex with Claire. She narrates, “He reaches an arm around my waist and with his other hand he begins to unbutton my jacket and then he goes on to the buttons of my blouse. ‘First things first,’ he says. He says something else. But I don’t need to listen. I can’t hear a thing with so much water going,” (Carver 279). Though it’s not an explicitly violent, there is definitely something vicious about facilitating unwanted sex. We saw earlier in the story what happened to the woman who was raped and how she ended up dead in the water, and the fact that Claire hears water as this starts happening represents Carver’s use of symbolism for water equating violence.

Similarly to the river in “So Much Water So Close To Home”, the river in “Nobody Said Anything” also serves as a representation of violence. The two boys in the story are trying to catch a giant fish in the river, and Carver somewhat disturbingly describes the hectic, philandering way that the narrator (one of the unnamed boys) ends up catching and pretty violently killing the fish. The river as the backdrop for this scene provides another example of Carver’s use of water to accompany violence. In addition, in the short, haunting story “Popular Mechanics”, where two parents engage in a physical fight for their baby, the story is introduced with an extremely watery backdrop. The narrator recalls that “early that day the weather turned and the snow was melting into dirty water. Streaks of it ran down from the little shoulder-high

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window that faced the backyard. Cars slushed by on the street outside, where it was getting dark,” (Carver 302). The fact that this incredibly violent, disturbing story is introduced surrounded by so much watery imagery in the form of rain and melting snow, lends to the pattern of water representing violence.

As we see from these examples from his short stories, Raymond Carver explores two very different representations of water utilizing it symbolically and thematically in his works. Drawing upon the water-filled setting of the Pacific Northwest, his frequent inclusion of water in its various forms provides us with a significant yet inconsistent symbol. On one hand, it serves as a representation of healing and comfort, but on the other, completely opposite hand, it also serves to represent violence. Though it may be initially seem surprising and unusual to have this sort of frequent symbolism without a conflicting meaning behind it, Carver’s stories are rich with conflict, and these contradictory interpretations of the same theme actually aid in the sense of disagreement and conflict that always seem to exist in Raymond Carver’s literature. In the end, water exists as a very small piece of a much larger, more important theme in Carver’s writing. I think the fact that his grave now sits in ‘Ocean View Cemetery’ in Port Angeles, Washington, can be interpreted as a sign that the contradiction will always exist. Though he is now dead, his body lying underground, he is at peace, with a view of the ocean, showing us that even though water can sit side by side with violence and death, it can also sit just as securely with comfort and peace.

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