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Carver's A SERIOUS TALK

Raymond Carver's "A Serious Talk" from *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* sums up his entire career. It is a grim, sad story and contains every theme and motif found in Carver's collected fiction—the failed marriage, the drunken exploits, the other lover waiting in the wings, the children having to deal with a broken family, smoking and drinking, doing regrettable things, and not saying the words that are inside the heart.

In "A Serious Talk," Burt is a man estranged from his wife and family; it is the day after Christmas and the night before he got drunk and botched things up (again). He returns seeking forgiveness from his wife, but she will not give it to him. She is seeing another man, which he reacts to in quiet anger, jealousy, and a bit of alcoholic sadness. He wants to have a "serious talk" with her. He believes this penultimate talk will fix everything that is wrong, but he cannot come up with the proper words: "He was not certain, but he thought he had proved something. He had hoped he had made something clear. The thing was, they had to have a serious talk soon. There were things that needed talking about, important things had to be discussed" (113).

Critics have contended that the real power of Carver's short fiction lies in what is not said rather than what is by his characters, perhaps as a "wish to repress or deflect the ennui and alienation of their class-bound lives," writes Bill Mullen (100). The reader, going along with the narrative, knows what the characters need to say to each other to smooth out the misunderstandings and the rough spots of their lives; the reader becomes frustrated, identifies with what is happening, and hopes the characters will do the "right" thing.

"A Serious Talk" exhibits this quandary of what is not but should be spoken. All Burt does is muse about this talk they must have; he tells her this, he thinks on it, but it never happens. Instead, he pours another drink and smokes another cigarette—motifs in many Carver stories, where the characters are

too preoccupied with the physical objects that give them a buzz to deflect from what is really going on in their lives. He hopes “he had made something clear,” but nothing is clear because nothing has been uttered—or, often, the wrong things have been said, accompanied by unfortunate acts (such as Burt leaving the pie he dropped in the driveway). He is not sincere when he apologizes to his wife. “Sorry isn’t good enough,” she tells him (108). She seems to be waiting for him to say and do “the right thing,” yet knows he will not and cannot. Perhaps she wants him to fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness the way the narrator does in a later Carver story, “Intimacy.” For all his drunken antics, he should, and maybe then she would react the way he wants her to; maybe she will believe he truly is sorry. Why else would she allow him back into the house, back into the family’s life, when she vowed not to let him hurt her and the kids again? She says, “Do you remember Thanksgiving? [. . .] I said then that was the last holiday you were going to wreck for us. Eating bacon and eggs instead of turkey at ten o’clock at night” (108).

Yet, here he is again, she has let him back into the familial interaction, perhaps (deep down) hoping things will change. “Relations are always tenuous at best in a cold war” (115), writes Arthur M. Saltzman. “Animosities close in to occupy the space vacated by meaningful speech,” Saltzman notes (115). Comparing the failed marriage and the continued drama to a “cold war” is fitting; while Burt and his wife are not at blows or each other’s throats, they are still in battle, and instead of speaking the words he feels are so important, “desperation moves him to ludicrous displays” (Saltzman 114).

This is endemic of most, if not all, Carver characters—if only they would show sincerity, speak up, things might change. Gunter Leypoldt points out that Burt “congratulates himself that ‘he had proved something’ and ‘made something clear’ [. . .] Burt’s ‘epiphany’ emerges clearly in his inability to express exactly what he wants to discuss with Vera, for his conceptualization stops at the abstract notions of ‘something’ or ‘things’ that will have to be dealt with” (540).

Pride or indifference become the obstacle. Rather than making amends, Burt’s only interest is to interfere with his wife’s new boyfriend. This is typical in stories such as “Gazebo,” from the same collection, where the husband and wife are too busy drinking and rehashing the past rather than discussing the problem that is ruining their marriage. In “Are You A Doctor?” and “Are These Actual Miles?” from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* the male protagonists never tell their wives what it is that is truly troubling them—either perceived infidelity, shame of poverty, or loss of human connection. They seem on the verge of telling their wives what is going on inside their hearts, but they never do, and so nothing changes, and misunderstandings are the result. In story after story, we find that this is the core issue of Carver’s fiction.

“There were things that needed talking about, important things had to be discussed” (*What We Talk about* 113). This sentence not only sums up Carver’s oeuvre but also many people’s lives. This is why many readers identify with Carver’s stories quite easily.

—MICHAEL HEMMINGSON, *San Diego State University*
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KEYWORDS

alcoholism, Raymond Carver, family, minimalism

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