

MINING FOR MEANING: A STUDY OF MINIMALISM
IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

JEREMY ROBERT BAILEY, B.A., M.A.

A DISSERTATION

IN

ENGLISH

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Tech University in
Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Approved

Wendell Aycock
Chair of the Committee

Sara Spurgeon

Scott Baugh

Ralph Ferguson
Dean of the Graduate School

December 2010

Copyright 2010
Jeremy Robert Bailey

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation director, Dr. Wendell Aycock, for the instruction he gave me while a student in his classes and agreeing to work with me on this project. I will forever be grateful for your advice, encouragement and patience. I would also like to thank Dr. Sara Spurgeon, Dr. Bryce Conrad, and Dr. Scott Baugh for their ideas and willingness to serve on my committee. I have appreciated the advice and kind words of many of classmates and friends who have been supportive and excited about this project. Thanks for listening to my ideas and allowing me to vent my frustrations. I would also like to thank Annie, my wonderful wife, for reading my work and putting up with me for the past few years. I look forward to future adventures with you. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my children--Taylor, Connor and Ashton.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Minimalism in Visual Arts	3
Minimalism in Music	10
Minimalism in Literature	11
Rationale and Methodology	21
II. ERNEST HEMINGWAY’S CONTRIBUTION TO LITERARY MINIMALISM	38
Repetition in “Big Two-Hearted River: Part I”	45
Heavy Dialogue and Ambiguity in “Hills Like White Elephants”	52
III. RAYMOND CARVER: “THE FATHER” OF AMERICAN MINIMALISM	67
A Minimalist Version of the Unreliable Narrator in “ <i>So Much Water So Close To Home</i> ” and “ <i>What We Talk About When We Talk About Love</i> ”	77
Silence as a Form of Communication in <i>What We Talk About When We Talk About Love</i>	89
IV. AMY HEMPEL: A CONTEMPORARY MASTER OF MINIMALIST FICTION	94
Metafiction and Minimalist Techniques in “ <i>What Were the White Things?</i> ”	96
Repetition and Ambiguity in “ <i>The Annex</i> ”	104

V.	CORMAC MCCARTHY: A NEW FACE IN AMERICAN MINIMALISM	115
	Minimalist Punctuation and “Short, Declarative Sentences”	116
	Narration and Dialogue in <i>The Road</i> and <i>The Sunset Limited</i>	121
	A Minimalist Version of the Unreliable Narrator in <i>The Crossing</i>	134
VI.	CORMAC MCCARTHY: FROM FAULKNER TO HEMINGWAY	141
VII.	CONCLUSION	160
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	167

ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents a series of readings that exemplify a wide range of important minimalist techniques in American literature. The study stems from my interest in the works of Cormac McCarthy, and particularly the question of both how and why McCarthy has developed into the highly minimalist author that he is today. My initial plan was to propose a book length study on McCarthy's latest minimalist works, but my research on other minimalist writers, particularly Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver and Amy Hempel soon revealed that the technique of minimalism, and particularly how minimalist characteristics can influence and heighten a reader's understanding of a story, should also be examined in this study. I have included a chapter on works by Hemingway to trace the early roots of literary minimalism, and a chapter on Carver to outline many of the important minimalist trademarks found in works written during the highpoint of American minimalism. The chapters on Hempel and McCarthy, two contemporary writers that have published a number of noteworthy minimalist stories in the past few years, bring this study into the present day.

LIST OF FIGURES

I.	<i>Lever</i>	5
II.	<i>Hanging Structure</i> (with stripes)	7
III.	<i>Fulcrum</i>	9

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The term “minimal,” the root word of “minimalism,” is defined as something that exists in the smallest amount or degree. This simple definition is neither positive nor negative, but in a world where people often consider “more” to be better than “less,” something described as minimal can bring to mind phrases such as “barely adequate,” or “just scraping by.” For this reason, some authors, including Raymond Carver, “the father” of American minimalism, cringe when classified as minimalist writers.¹ When critics consider the complex, confusing, and at times even derogatory nature of the term as it pertains to written texts, it is not surprising that they have yet to agree on a universal definition of literary minimalism. This fact complicates matters for scholars attempting to write on so-called minimalist stories, and poses a particular challenge to those interested in examining both how and why authors choose to employ minimalist techniques in their works. Because the term itself is difficult to define, many critics choose to discuss certain aspects or characteristics common to minimalist writers and stories in place of arguing over highly subjective definitions of the term. For example, in “A Maximalist Novelist Looks at Some Minimalist Fiction,” Linsey Abrams addresses the ambiguous nature of minimalist literature when she writes, “Minimalist fiction, at its best, draws resonance from simple understandings, accumulated into structures where the whole is greater than the

¹ In an interview with Mona Simpson, Carver remarks, “. . . somebody called me a ‘minimalist’ writer. But I didn’t like it. There’s something about ‘minimalist’ that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don’t like” (210).

sum of the parts. At its worst, those same simple understandings are presented linearly, rendering them simplistic, if not inauthentic” (24). Kim Herzinger examines the reader’s role in understanding a minimalist text in his introduction to the 1985 winter edition of *Mississippi Review*: “The reader of minimalist fiction is being asked to face the characters in the story the way we face people in the world, people who do not—in my experience at least—ordinarily declare their personal histories, political and moral attitudes, or psychological conditions for my profit and understanding” (17). Chuck Palahniuk, a contemporary minimalist writer best known for his novel *Fight Club*, states the following with respect to minimalism: “In minimalism, a story is a symphony, building and building, but never losing the original melody line. All characters and scenes, things that seem dissimilar, they all illustrate some aspect of the story’s theme” (2). These statements which highlight important characteristics of minimalist texts can help readers to better understand the literary minimalist tradition, but because a single, all-encompassing definition of the term has yet to be agreed upon, readers are often asked to choose whether or not a particular story fits their own particular definition of minimalism.² With such limitations in mind, the following list highlights what may be considered to be the most common and important elements of contemporary minimalist fiction:

- a) Simple, unadorned prose
- b) Heavy dialogue with little to no exposition

² Kim Herzinger discusses the problematic nature of the term “minimalism” when stating, “The point is that minimalism is not a good term. It is not a useful term. We would like to get rid of it, to replace it with something appropriately descriptive, something not derived from painting nor sculpture nor architecture nor music. It has shown itself to be, at best, misleading, and at worst devaluative. But it is, for now, what we have” (9).

- c) First (sometimes second) person narration
- d) Ambiguous (sometimes unreliable) narration
- e) Present tense narration
- f) Repetition of words, phrases or ideas
- g) Informal, relatable and familiar tone
- h) Generally domestic and “safe” setting
- i) Stories generally include one or two simple, middle-class characters
- j) Stories are contemporary and realistic, often dealing with common place subject matter
- k) Textual omissions/gaps are used to highlight main ideas and also to create ambiguity
- l) Silence used as a form of communication
- m) Minimal action and plot
- n) Stylistically sparse (punctuation, speaker tags, personal identifiers, etc. are often limited or omitted)
- o) Important action often takes place outside the story, or just prior to the beginning of the story
- p) Open-ended conclusions

Critics Cynthia Hallett, Kim Herzinger and Arthur Saltzman, praise minimalist writers for their ability to do away with all unnecessary information in order to focus exclusively on necessary events and actions. Others, like John Biguenet, Robert Dunn and Raymond Federman criticize the technique, fearing that relatively plotless, formally sparse works must somehow be incomplete. Because both supporters and opponents of the minimalist tradition make valid arguments, it is necessary to begin a study on literary minimalism by examining both the history of the minimalist movement and the primary characteristics common to most minimalist works.

Minimalism in Visual Arts

The term “minimalism” is generally used by critics of visual arts and music to describe the technique of “stripping down” a work in order to allow viewers and

listeners to focus exclusively on important and fundamental elements of the piece.³ The term gained popularity in the world of visual arts in the early 1960s, approximately a decade before “minimalism” was commonly tied to works of literature. In *Small Worlds: Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature*, Warren Motte writes, “Centered primarily in Manhattan, the [minimalist] movement included such figures as Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Mel Bochner, Tony Smith, Robert Smithson, and Walter De Maria” (1). With the exception of Robert Smithson, who is known primarily as an “earthwork artist,” the men who make up this select list are best known as sculptors. It is worth noting that paintings and other forms of artwork can also be classified as minimalist, but, as Motte’s list of artists suggests, the definition of minimalism as it applies to the visual arts is most commonly and easily recognized in sculpture. Although a variety of different materials such as brick, plywood, concrete, Plexiglas, styrofoam, fluorescent lights, aluminum and felt are used to create the minimalist sculptures, all of the artists on Motte’s list seem to share a collective goal—the desire to create a meaningful experience in the minds of viewers through simple means. Because the term “minimalism” was first used in America to describe certain facets of visual art, and eventually led to the term’s adoption and application to works of

³ Warren Motte examines and defines how the term “minimalism” applies to artwork: “Minimal art describes abstract, geometric painting and sculpture executed in the United States in the 1960s. Its predominant organizing principles include the right angle, the square, and the cube, rendered with a minimum of incident or compositional maneuvering In the most radical minimalist experiments, the focus on the thing itself is intended by the artist to clear away all traces of received narrative, metaphor, and figure in order to provide the viewer with an open, unmediated experience” (8, 14).

literature sharing similar dominant traits, it is helpful to begin a discussion on the history of minimalism by examining a few works of minimalist sculpture.

Carl Andre is regularly considered one of the founding fathers of minimalist art. The majority of his sculptures are composed of ordinary materials and characterized by the repetition of shape, size and material and the unique juxtaposition of form (predominantly flat in nature) with open space. His 1966



Fig. 1. Carl Andre, *Lever* 1966. The AMICA Library. National Gallery of Canada. Ontario, 2003. Web. Dec. 2007.

work, *Lever*, typifies minimalist sculpture for a number of reasons. The piece consists of 137 firebricks placed side by side in a single straight line beginning at the gallery wall and extending into the open space of the room. In *Lever*, Andre uses the geometric form of the rectangle, a primary shape used by both artists and architects, to create a clean, unified line on the floor. As with many of his other “floor-pieces” such as

Equivalent VIII (1966), *36 Copper Square* (1968), and *Aluminum Steel Plain* (1969), at first glance, *Lever* almost appears too simple to be considered an actual work of art. Critic David Joselit expresses the following regarding *Lever* and minimalism in general as it applies to the visual arts: “In *Lever* as in most

minimalist works, the 'ground' against which forms appear is the actual floor of the gallery, and the viewer is consequently embraced within the 'composition' rather than standing outside it" (*American Art Since 1945* 108). *Lever* is certainly simple when one considers the material used (industrial firebricks) and the form of the sculpture (a single straight line), but as is true with most minimalist works, *Lever* forces viewers to actively participate and question whether or not they are missing something. Joselit continues: "the categorical indeterminacy of such works—their refusal to settle into any particular medium or message—shifts the burden of interpretation onto the viewer who must 'invent' a meaning for them" (109). As an art critic, Joselit is primarily concerned with defining certain aspects of minimalism pertaining to the study of visual arts; his definition also supports the argument that readers of minimalist literature must "step inside" the text for true and lasting meaning to occur. Does it matter that Andre's sculpture consists of exactly 137 bricks? What role does the title of the piece play? Why does Andre use firebricks in this sculpture in place of a different material? Instead of providing concrete answers to complex questions, the ambiguous nature of minimalist works invites participants to question seemingly simple, even trivial issues.

Cubes and squares play an important role in many of Sol LeWitt's sculptures. In "Serial Project No. 1," a 1966 text accompanying a sculpture titled "Serial Project," LeWitt defines a major element of minimalism when discussing his reasons for using squares and cubes in the work: "The square and cube are efficient and symmetrical A more complex form would be too interesting in

itself and obstruct the meaning of the whole. There is no need to invent new forms” (373). In his minimalist sculptures, LeWitt relies on the simplicity and uniformity of squares and cubes to create meaning by allowing viewers to experience what he believes to be the most essential element/s of the works. Similar to *Serial Project*, LeWitt’s *Hanging Structure (with stripes)* consisted primarily of cubed, square and rectangular shaped objects. The squares,



cubes, and straight lines used in the sculpture are common elements of both art and architecture, but the large number of repetitive lines and shapes used in the work, mixed with the fact that the piece hangs from the ceiling, add a certain level of complexity to what might at first be considered a simplistic sculpture. In a sense, *Hanging Structure*

Fig. 2. Sol LeWitt, *Hanging Structure (with stripes)* 1961. LeWitt, Sol. *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000: 53. Print.

represents the inverse of Hemingway’s “Iceberg Principle” as seven-eighths of the sculpture is clearly seen, while just the upper eighth of the piece, the part of

the sculpture facing the ceiling, is actually excluded from view. Art critic Robert Rosenblum states the following in response to LeWitt's use of cubes and squares in his minimalist sculptures:

[T]he deadpan, inert simplicity of a fundamental component—an open or closed cubic volume, a square plain crossed by parallel lines, or simply a line drawn between two designated points on a surface—is swiftly but logically multiplied by and combined with related components until suddenly the eye and the mind are boggled by the irrational, cat's cradle complexities that can spring from such obvious foundations. (257)

Hanging Structure succeeds as a minimalist work primarily because LeWitt uses simple forms in an interesting yet unorthodox way; namely, LeWitt uses “deadpan” cubes and squares to create a complex sculpture that demands viewers to actively participate as they visually “take in” the work from multiple perspectives. All but the topmost surfaces of the individual pieces are clearly seen, but the repetitive yet jumbled arrangement of shapes and lines make *Hanging Structure* a visual maze, with deep meaning seemingly hidden in plain view.

Richard Serra's *Fulcrum* (1987) stands at the west entrance to the Liverpool Street Railway Station. The term “small” naturally relates to the term “minimal,” but *Fulcrum* proves that the physical size and weight of an object doesn't necessarily affect whether or not a work should be considered minimalist.

The sculpture stands an impressive 55 feet in height and consists of five plates of Cor-ten steel, each weighing many tons. *Fulcrum* is similar to many of Serra's



Fig. 3. Richard Serra, *Fulcrum* 1987. Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Andrew Dunn 17 Aug. 2005. Web. Dec, 2007.

other works like *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* (1969), *Spin Out* (1972-73), and the once controversial and now dismantled *Tilted Arc* (1976), as steel is used as the sole material in each of these sculptures. The massive size and weight of the sculpture is far from minimal, but the common material used in the sculpture and the manner in which the sculpture is erected represent certain

minimalist characteristics. Prior to assembly, each of the steel plates were intentionally rusted to add a natural color and weathered look to the sculpture. The most impressive element of *Fulcrum* is that the sculpture is free-standing; nothing but the massive weight of the individual plates keeps the work upright. Most critics agree that the primary purpose of *Fulcrum* and many of Serra's other

minimalist works is to display in a simple yet creative way the enormous weight and natural strength of steel.

Minimalism in Music

In 1968, a few years after the term “minimalism” was first applied to works of visual art, composer Michael Nyman used the term to describe a new, experimental type of music. The term directly descends from, and is used in many of the same ways as in the world of visual arts. Tom Johnson, a composer and self-professed minimalist, defines minimalism as it applies to music in the introduction to his collection of articles on the “new music in New York”:

The idea of minimalism is much larger than most people realize. It includes, by definition, any music that works with limited or minimal materials: pieces that use only a few notes, pieces that only use a few words of text, or pieces written for very limited instruments, such as antique cymbals, bicycle wheels, or whiskey glasses. It includes pieces that sustain one basic electronic rumble for a long time It includes pieces that slow the tempo down to two or three notes per minute. (2)

Johnson’s definition highlights many of the important trademarks that a listener might notice when hearing minimalist music. His definition does not, however, address why certain American musicians, like Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass, frequently employed minimalist techniques in their music during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Because that which *isn’t* included in a minimalist work is

often as important as what *is* included, to truly appreciate, or in some instances even begin to understand a minimalist work, a viewer, listener or reader must actively participate in the creative process. Critic Warren Motte supports this notion when writing that minimalist musicians, like minimalist sculptors, painters and writers, “hold the encounter of the audience with the work to be of central importance . . . the subject of the minimalist work is the work itself and the audience’s encounter with it” (21). Without active participation, a viewer of minimalist artwork, listener of minimalist music, or reader of minimalist literature is simply a passive observer who fails to partake in the full and rewarding experience offered by minimalist works.

Minimalism in Literature

The term “minimalism” was first applied to works of American literature in the 1960s, but a number of prominent writers had previously employed minimalist techniques in both novels and short stories. In *Minimalism and the Short Story*, Cynthia Hallett names five well-known, highly influential writers as precursors to the 1960s minimalist movement. Hallett writes:

The seeds of artifice that inform both minimalism and the short story can be traced to such otherwise diverse writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Ernest Hemingway—all of whose conscious codes of omission were designed to make an audience feel more than they understood: Poe’s notion of unity and singleness of effect;

Chekhov's maxim that he must focus on the end of a short story and 'artfully' concentrate there an impression of total work; Joyce's minimal dependence on the traditional notion of plot, renouncing highly plotted stories in favor of seemingly static episodes and 'slices' of reality; Beckett's efforts 'to present the ultimate distillation of his inimitable world-view . . . to compress and edulcorate [purify] traditional genres' (Hutchings 86); and Hemingway's method of communicating complex emotional states by seemingly simple patterning of concrete detail, what he called the 'tip of the iceberg' effect . (12)

Following the trends previously established in art and music, writers became increasingly interested in minimalism as a literary technique in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this time, the number of writers appearing on scholarly lists of minimalist writers grew exponentially. The names on lists of minimalist writers vary from critic to critic, but the following contemporary writers of American fiction are consistently mentioned and considered important to the study of literary minimalism: Alice Adams, Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bret Easton Ellis, Amy Hempel, Bobbie Ann Mason, Chuck Palahniuk, Grace Paley, Mary Robison, Elizabeth Tallent and Tobias Wolff.

Although the term "minimalism" as it applies to literature was adopted from the world of visual arts and music, certain differences exist between a "minimalist" story and a "minimalist" sculpture or musical composition. As Hallett writes, "the tendencies with minimalism in the visual arts is to avoid any

implications or meaning beyond the subject/object itself and to aim at a kind of phenomenological purity, whereas the tendency in literature is to evoke within a minimal frame some larger issue by means of figurative associations” (1). In other words, where viewers of minimalist artwork, or listeners of a minimalist composition are invited to take a “what you see (or hear) is what you get” approach, a reader of a minimalist text must adopt a “there is more than meets the eye” approach to find lasting meaning in the text. Hallett further elaborates on the figurative nature of minimalism as it pertains to literature when discussing the relationship between minimalist works and short stories in general: “as a literary style minimalism is as the short story does—at the most basic level and in a leaner format. Both are compact, condensed, and contracted in design; both are especially dependent on figurative language and symbolic associations as channels for expanded meaning” (4). Hallett later addresses the important role that readers of minimalist texts must play in order to find “rich” and lasting meanings symbolically embedded in the text: “At first reading, many minimal narratives can seem internally disconnected, the sentences detached from one another, the ending as much a beginning as the first line; but when the stories are read closely, oblique references and dim designs combine into a rich texture of trope—exposing a pattern of meaning within the symbolic structure” (12). Readers of minimalist texts must first discover particular patterns seemingly hidden in the “oblique references and dim designs” true of minimalist texts before learning from, or perhaps even beginning to understand, what the author is suggesting in their story. Once the unique pattern or patterns used in the

minimalist text are discovered, readers are invited to combine the seemingly “simple” ideas expressed in the story with their own, often complex life experiences, ultimately resulting in a meaningful union between the fictional story and what consists of reality as far as the particular reader is concerned.

In *Small Worlds*, Warren Motte discusses why minimalist writers might choose to address and focus on “simple” things in their works, such as straightforward plotlines, ordinary characters and plain, even laconic dialogue between characters. Like Hallett, Motte attempts to counter the anti-minimalist argument that “simplicity” in and of itself might suggest that a work is less complete or perhaps even unfinished. According to Motte:

Simple things are free from complexity, devoid of intricacy or ruse, unembellished, unaffected, plain [S]imple things are apparently *artless*, and indeed the accusation of artistic vacuity is one of the dangers that awaits any minimalist undertaking. It is important to understand, however, that the minimalist aesthetic does not valorize vacuity as such. Rather, vacuity is the surface effect of a deliberate process of eschewal and restriction intended to clear away conventional rhetoric in an attempt to approximate the essential. (4)

As Motte notes, minimalist writers intentionally “eschew” or “restrict” readers from knowing certain facts that would likely be revealed in a “conventional” text in order to bring the most important information to the forefront. The “missing” information might initially confuse readers, or perhaps even be interpreted as a

careless oversight by the author, but supporters of minimalism argue that skilled writers, including the four whose works are closely examined in this study, purposely use omissions to underscore main ideas and invite readers to use their own knowledge and experience to fill in the blanks in whichever way works best for the particular reader. Motte closes his introductory chapter by examining a few works that he considers important to the study of minimalism, focusing primarily on *Breath*, Samuel Beckett's twenty-five second mini-play. According to Motte, *Breath* represents "the zero degree of minimalism" (24). Motte cites *Breath* to show how "simple things" and methods, especially when used by skilled minimalist writers, wield a surprising level of power in that they can have a meaningful and lasting effect on readers. Motte continues, "... for all its insistence upon fragility, *Breath* itself is a very strong text. In its formal concision, its concentrated laconism, its simplicity, in the way it plays both upon broad traditional thematics and the conventions of the theater, it is in a real sense inevitable and irrefutable" (25).

As early as the mid-1920s, Ernest Hemingway was employing a number of striking minimalist techniques in stories like "Cat in the Rain," "A Canary for One," and "Hills Like White Elephants." Not until the 1960s, however, was the term "minimalism" actually tied to Hemingway and applied to contemporary works of American literature by prominent literary scholars. In the early 1970s, this "new type" of short story featuring ordinary characters facing commonplace questions and struggles began to appear in popular magazines and well respected newspapers, most notably *The New Yorker*. Literary minimalism

reached its height in North America in 1985, when writers such as Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel and Mary Robison dominated the short story market. As quickly as the movement gained in notoriety during the late 1970s and early 1980s, by 1990, just two short years after the untimely death of Raymond Carver, the minimalist trend fizzled to the point of near extinction.⁴ It is certainly true that fewer “minimalist” works have been published in the past three decades than were published in the 1970s and 1980s, but during the past thirty years, a number of valuable minimalist works, some of which will be labeled as “minimalist” for the first time in this study, have been written by Mary Robison, Tobias Wolff, Amy Hempel, Cormac McCarthy and other influential contemporary American authors.

The omission of seemingly important details is often the first issue opponents of minimalism address when considering works of literary minimalism. Without question, minimalist writers consciously omit what they consider to be “bulky,” unnecessary details in order to focus on the most important ideas expressed in a story. In a non-fiction book titled, *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), Hemingway first introduced his “Theory of Omission,” a theory also known as the “Iceberg Principle.” According to Hemingway:

⁴ Roland Sadowsky attempts to trace all of the short stories published in prominent magazines such as *The New Yorker* from 1970-1990 to find the exact number of minimalist texts published during this time frame. According to Sadowsky, “The ‘heavy’ years in *The New Yorker* began in 1981 (12 minimalist stories) when Beattie, Robison, and Mason were joined by F. Barthelme and Carver. Twelve were published in 1982, 14 in 1983, eight in 1984, and nine each in 1985 and 1986. By the time the outcry of writers and critics such as Dunn, Iannone, Bell, Newman, and many others against minimalism had gained some momentum, the phenomenon—or literary phase, or fad; all of these terms have some validity—was over: only three minimalist stories appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1987, one in 1988, and three in 1989. There were none in 1990” (533). Although Sadowsky’s list is helpful, because the “definition” of “minimalism” differs from critic to critic, I find it difficult, if not impossible, to conclusively list the exact number of minimalist stories published from 1970-1990.

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (192)

As Hemingway suggests, in well-written stories that which *isn't* directly stated is often equal to, if not more important than what actually *is* stated on the page. Naturally, and as Hemingway points out in his theory, an unskilled writer can certainly damage a story by omitting information that is absolutely necessary for the reader's understanding of a story. By examining both how and why Hemingway and others use the minimalist technique of omission in their works, I propose in the following chapters that omissions can actually strengthen a story as they invite readers to become actively involved in finding meaning in a story. Successful minimalist writers often fill the void seemingly left by certain omissions by creating a sense of comfort and familiarity for readers in other ways. For instance, minimalist stories are generally set in safe, domestic places like living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens or even cars. Characters in minimalist stories are often shown eating and drinking while discussing seemingly trivial things. Minimalist writers also tend to employ first-person narrators that speak in the present tense. This particular narrative voice is primarily used by authors to create an informal, "chatty" tone that most readers can relate to in one way or another. Though seemingly important details such as names, occupations, and perhaps even the very reason why the characters are found talking in the first

place are commonly withheld in minimalist works, a sense of familiarity is often created by the “comfortable” setting, first-person narration, and even the subject matter itself, inviting readers to actively engage in the story.⁵ This argument supports Herzinger’s statement that reading minimalist fiction is “a conjugal act—an intimacy shared. Both parties must participate wholly, if the act is going to work” (15). Attempting to understand a minimalist story can certainly challenge, and even discourage readers who feel most comfortable when knowing exactly what is taking place in a narrative, but when such readers allow themselves to look past what *isn’t* included in a text and “intimately” connect to what minimalist writers *do* choose to express in their stories, seeming “omissions” can strengthen the stories and direct readers toward lasting meanings waiting to be discovered in the text.

Minimalist stories are generally populated with one or two primary characters often depicted as simple, middle-class people struggling to both speak and act. Ironically, most characters in minimalist stories appear to have important things to say, but they regularly choose not to talk, or when they do attempt to speak, their message is unheard, misinterpreted, or even ignored by other characters. For instance, silence is the norm throughout Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, a short minimalist novel that William Faulkner

⁵ Linsey Abrams discusses how readers of minimalist texts can benefit by “encountering the familiar.” According to Abrams, “There is a satisfaction, a concurring, in encountering the familiar; we too have watched these same TV shows or used these same products. Either that, or we, along with the author, perceive that if not ourselves, a lot of other Americans are caught in a net of proper names they never even saw get lowered over their heads. As readers, we are in a privileged position, that of a safe distance from this mental, social predicament. *Identification* on the part of the reader is in this case not the psychological process of connection with an ‘other’ to find shared human ground not previously recognized. Instead, it is the process of feeling connected to a character perceived to be entirely like ourselves, according to shared surface details” (28).

praised for its “simplicity.”⁶ George Willard, the main character, is a struggling newspaper reporter that tends to report on mundane, even meaningless facts. Many of the characters found in the novel enjoy George’s company and talk exclusively to him about their innermost troubles and desires, but speech alone affects nothing in Winesburg. In the “Paper Pills” chapter, for instance, Dr. Reefy chooses to record his intimate thoughts on tiny pieces of paper, keeping them safely hidden in his pocket in place of sharing his thoughts with others. When Dr. Reefy finally opens up and shares some of his precious thoughts with his wife, she dies shortly thereafter, forever silencing her husband. Similarly, in “The Teacher,” George’s former school teacher looks George in the eyes and makes the following, highly minimalist statement: “If you are to become a writer you’ll have to stop fooling with words You must not become a mere peddler of words. The thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say” (89-90). Though verbal communication appears important and valued in Anderson’s story, as is true in most minimalist texts, the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* are unable to verbally communicate in ways that are lasting and meaningful.

Most critics agree that the characters in minimalist stories are contemporary, as is the common-place subject matter examined by minimalist authors.⁷ In many of Amy Hempel’s works, for instance, characters struggle to deal with day-to-day challenges such as divorce, living with a serious illness, or

⁶ See *Dallas Morning News* 26 April 1925, Part 3: 7. Print.

⁷ According to Kim Herzinger, “Minimalism’s characteristic mode is realist (even hyperrealist), and not fabulist; its characteristic subject matter is domestic, regional, quotidian, and banal” (23).

copied with the death of a loved one. In her highly regarded and frequently anthologized story, "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried," the unnamed female protagonist spends a number of difficult weeks in an intensive care ward with her terminally ill friend. Although the narrator wishes to comfort her friend in any way possible, she isn't allowed to discuss the actual illness. Instead, the dying friend makes the following request in the opening lines of the story: "Tell me things I won't mind forgetting. . . . Make it useless stuff or skip it" (29).

Because the narrator is asked not to discuss the illness with her friend, it soon becomes impossible for the narrator to accept the fact that her friend is about to die. When the friend ultimately does die, the narrator describes the event in the following way: "On the morning she was moved to the cemetery, the one where Al Jolson is buried, I enrolled in a 'Fear of Flying' class" (39). Because the narrator had not been allowed to vocally express her worries and fears with her friend leading up to her death, the narrator ultimately speaks of her friend's death as if it were little more than a temporary move from one locale to another. On the surface this contemporary and highly realistic story appears to be about illness and dying, but as Hallett notes, "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried" is really about the "language of grief. . . about those left behind when someone dies—the yet living and yet grieving—trying to deal with what is now the past" (92). Hempel's story succeeds primarily because she uses the minimalist technique of silencing the main character throughout the story to remind readers that the act of talking about sickness and death is often as difficult, if not more difficult, than witnessing the actual events leading up to the death of a loved one.

The physical structure of a story must be considered before determining whether or not a work should be classified as minimalist. In “A Few Words About Minimalism,” John Barth divides his “definition” of minimalism into individual parts. He first writes of “minimalisms of unit, form and scale” which would include both “short-short stories” and how short words, sentences, chapters and titles are commonly used by minimalist writers (Section 7; Page 1). Many of Hempel’s stories, including “In a Tub,” “San Francisco,” and “A Man in Bogota,” qualify as structurally minimalist as they are extremely short, around just four-hundred words in length. Barth also speaks of a “minimalism of material” which addresses issues such as minimal plot, minimal action, and minimal exposition (Section 7; Page 1). Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” and Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” two of the minimalist stories examined in this study, fit this classification. In both of these stories, dialogue dominates and little to no exposition is provided by the narrators. There are certainly additional factors to consider when defining, classifying, or simply discussing a minimalist text, but the technique of using heavy dialogue and minimal exposition in a story is one of the most important and regularly used minimalist techniques as it invites readers to rely heavily on their own personal experiences and knowledge when attempting to understand the work.

Rationale and Methodology

In Chapter II I discuss Hemingway’s “Theory of Omission” and provide detailed readings of “Big Two-Hearted River,” “Hills Like White Elephants,” and

The Old Man and the Sea to establish a foundation on which to build and expand the current argument pertaining to literary minimalism. Hemingway was a prolific writer of both novels and short stories, but only a small handful of his works continually surface in discussions on minimalism. As mentioned earlier, “Cat in the Rain,” “A Canary for One,” and “Hills Like White Elephants” are the three works most commonly classified as minimalist texts. These works are labeled as minimalist for different reasons, but they share striking similarities in terms of how dialogue functions in the stories.

With the exception of the short, expository paragraph introducing the setting and situation, dialogue is used almost exclusively in “Hills Like White Elephants.” Robert Paul Lamb notes that on at least six different occasions in the story, the unnamed American man repeats close variations of the statement, “I only want you to do it if you want to,” to his lover, Jig (11). To some readers, this vague statement (“it” refers primarily to a possible abortion) might appear as chivalrous. However, the minimalist techniques used in the story suggest that the man wants Jig to abort the baby for purely selfish reasons. According to Lamb, Jig understands that the man is not at all concerned about her personal interests with regards to the baby, so she responds by either repeating his words back, “things will be like they were,” or through self-deprecating statements such as “Then I’ll do it. Because I don’t care about me” (11). In these instances, and as is often true of minimalist stories, the way things are said, and not the actual statements, is what matters most. Jig’s final statement, “There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine” (278) further supports this argument. Considering the

frustrating and extremely vague nature of the conversation which dominates the story, Jig's concluding remarks couldn't be further from the truth. Ultimately, Jig's statement forces readers to question whether or not she will follow through with the abortion. Without extensive reader participation, not only might the primary topic of discussion be missed since the terms abortion, baby and pregnancy are never actually used in the story, but the feelings and motives of both characters might be misinterpreted as well.

A study on literary minimalism would be incomplete without a chapter dedicated to Raymond Carver, the man commonly referred to as "the father" of American minimalism. Carver lived a short, fast-paced life. He married young and worked a number of menial jobs to support his wife and two children. Many critics attribute Carver's early minimalist stories to the fact that he was given limited amounts of time to write, due in part to his new-found familial responsibilities.⁸ To further complicate matters for the aspiring writer, Carver became an alcoholic during his twenties and battled the disease throughout most of his adulthood. Not only did alcohol and other forms of substance abuse lead to Carver's early death, substance abuse also destroyed his first marriage. Though Carver considered the 1960s and most of the 1970s to be his "dark years," some of his best and most loved stories were produced during this

⁸ In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Carver discusses how "daily distractions," "family responsibilities," etc. limited his writing to short periods of time: "When I started out as a writer, I was moving around a lot, and there were daily distractions, weird jobs, family responsibilities. My life seemed very fragile, so I wanted to be able to start something that I felt I had a reasonable chance of seeing my way through to finish—which meant I needed to finish things in a hurry, a short period of time" (72).

challenging period of his life.⁹ Carver's minimalist stories which often feature middle-class characters struggling in the same ways that he and many others were struggling during the 1970s, gained instant popularity. Chapter III examines how Carver uses a minimalist framework in many of his stories to tackle difficult issues such as failed or failing relationships, alcoholism, stifled speech, middle-class working conditions and even feminism. The characters in Carver's stories generally choose to deal with difficult challenges in a passive aggressive manner, and often speak in short, simple sentences. When Carver's characters actually decide to act, the action is quick and generally shocking. The actions themselves, however, just like the failed attempts to speak and communicate, usually result in nothing worthwhile.

The 1974 collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, is Carver's minimalist masterpiece. In part, Chapter III aims to further establish a solid, historical framework with respect to the American literary minimalist tradition. For this reason, I include various approaches to Carver's well-known stories "The Bath" and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," in this chapter. Because one of the primary intents of this study is to bring both "new" and "less-mentioned" stories into the current discussion on minimalism, I conclude the chapter by analyzing a number of "lesser" known, but highly minimalist stories found in Carver's collection.

⁹ A year before his death, Carver stated in the McCaffery/Gregory interview, "My life is very different now than it used to be, it seems much more comprehensible to me. It was previously almost impossible for me to imagine trying to write a novel in the state of incomprehension, despair, really, that I was in. I have hope now and I didn't have hope then—"hope" in the sense of belief. I believe now that the world will exist for me tomorrow in the same way it exists for me today. That didn't used to be the case. For a long time I found myself living by the seat of my pants, making things terribly difficult for myself and everyone around me by my drinking" (64).

Fourteen of the seventeen stories in the *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* collection deal in part with alcohol or substance abuse, and all of the stories in the collection revolve around failed or rapidly failing relationships. In “Why Don’t You Dance?” the first story in the collection, the protagonist pours himself a glass of whisky in the opening line and continues to drink throughout the story. Alcohol abuse certainly plays a prominent role, but readers are never told whether or not the man’s alcoholism is to blame for the couple’s apparent separation. Readers next learn that the man has moved both his and his wife’s primary belongings, including the bed, television, couch, record player, and a number of lamps into the front yard, only to reorder the belongings and connect the appliances as if nothing had changed but the physical location. A young, married couple arrives on the scene and the trio discusses prices as if the man were holding a garage sale. After selling a few items, the protagonist puts on a record and asks, “Why don’t you dance?” The story ends with the girl telling friends and co-workers about the man and the impromptu garage sale, yet her attempts to learn more about the man and episode are futile. In this highly ambiguous story, the girl’s final attempt to talk through the events fails to shed further light on the strange occurrence. As in most of Carver’s minimalist works, the characters in “Why Don’t You Dance?” appear highly realistic, but a discernable plot is virtually nonexistent. Readers, like the young woman, are left to decide what to make of the man’s strange actions, as all of the seemingly important questions remain unanswered.

Because opponents of literary minimalism often favor stories containing traditional plotlines, they are often quick to attack relatively “plot-less” stories like “Why Don’t You Dance?” Without question, the success of many literary masterpieces such as Miguel De Cervantes’ *Don Quixote de La Mancha*, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, is due in large part to the strong and compelling storylines. For minimalist writers, however, plot is never the primary concern. “Why Don’t You Dance” may not be Carver’s best or most well known story, but it succeeds as the opening work in his most minimalist collection for a number of reasons. Carver concludes the story with the narrator speaking the following lines on behalf of the bewildered female character: “She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying” (10). In “Why Don’t You Dance?” and the other sixteen stories that follow, Carver suggests that “talking it out” is often a useless endeavor. Rather than filling in the blanks and providing readers with a simple alternative to talking, Carver challenges readers throughout *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* to ponder life’s common yet difficult questions in an attempt to better understand certain experiences and situations that all people face at some point in their lives.

Verbal communication is again stifled throughout Carver’s “A Serious Talk.” In the story, a man returns home for Christmas, hoping to spend a few quality moments with his wife and children. The “couple” eventually exchange presents: the man gives his wife a cashmere sweater, and in return, she gives him a gift certificate. The symbolic nature of the gifts suggests that the man’s

feelings for his wife are deeper than her feelings for him. To further complicate matters, the man's Christmas visit is cut short by an unnamed visitor who calls and later arrives to visit the wife. Upon learning of the mysterious visitor, and also angered by his wife's lack of attention, the man returns the next day with plans to have "a serious talk." For the second consecutive day, the man attempts to share his feelings and perhaps begin some sort of marital reconciliation, but his attempt is again interrupted and ultimately thwarted by a phone call. When the wife demands that he hang up the phone so that she can take the call in the other room, the protagonist hastily responds by cutting the phone cord. Although this telling and unexpected act initially startles the wife, instead of sitting down and having the much needed "serious talk," the man abruptly leaves the house and the story ends. As is often the case in Carver's minimalist stories, the relationship appears doomed as communication and any chance at reconciliation between the characters appears impossible.

I conclude Chapter III by examining "One More Thing," the final story in Carver's 1974 collection. In the story, a woman named Maxine returns home from work to find L.D., her inebriated husband, verbally abusing Rae, their fifteen-year old daughter. Much like the vague discussion between Jig and the American in "Hills Like White Elephants," Rae and L.D. argue about some mysterious, unnamed problem, said to be "all in his [L.D.'s] head" (156). Because she is both exhausted from her day at work and emotionally fed up with L.D.'s words and actions, Maxine decides that she has no choice but to throw L.D. out of the house: "L.D., I've had it. So has Rae. So has everyone who

knows you. I've been thinking it over. I want you out of here. Tonight. This minute. Now. Get the hell out of here right now" (156). Both drunk and angry, and perhaps knowing that a verbal response will get him nowhere, L.D. responds to his wife's demands by picking up a jar of pickles and throwing it through the kitchen window (157). The story and collection ends with L.D. facing his wife and daughter a final time just moments before leaving the house:

He put the suitcase down and the shaving bag on top of the suitcase. He drew himself up and faced them.

They moved back.

"Watch it, Mom," Rae said.

"I'm not afraid of him," Maxine said.

L.D. put the shaving bag under his arm and picked up the suitcase.

He said, "I just want to say one more thing."

But then he could not think what it could possibly be. (159)

As is often true of Carver's minimalist stories, the final lines of "One More Thing" can be interpreted in a number of ways and the episode leaves readers with more questions than answers. It is certainly possible that L.D. fails to remember the "one more thing" that he wishes to share with Rae and Maxine simply because he's drunk. It is also possible that the mental condition that is still a mystery to readers causes L.D. to forget what he had wanted to say to his wife and daughter. Or, in a fitting conclusion to a masterfully written collection full of troubled relationships peopled with alcoholic and tongue-tied characters, perhaps

the final lines of the story are written not only to conclude the story, but also to echo the lines first stated in the opening story of the collection: “There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying” (10). Perhaps more than any other short story collection, the fruitless conversations which dominate Carver’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* express that in minimalist stories, problems are rarely, if ever, simply “talked out.”

Contemporary short story writer Amy Hempel continues to make a number of important contributions to the study of literary minimalism. Although two of Hempel’s stories “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried” (1983) and “The Harvest” (1998) are regularly anthologized, with exception to Cynthia Hallet’s work, *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*, few critics have written extensively on Hempel’s works. Furthermore, Hempel has recently published two short story collections, *Tumble Home* (1997) and *The Dog of the Marriage* (2005) which include seventeen “new” minimalist stories that are not mentioned in Hallet’s study. Because one of the goals of this study is to examine contemporary minimalist works which are either under-represented or not previously mentioned by literary scholars, in Chapter IV I place a heavy emphasis on the stories found in Hempel’s two most current collections.

Not only is Hempel a gifted and intriguing writer, but stories like “In a Tub,” “The Annex” (1997), “Jesus is Waiting” (2005), and “The Afterlife” (2005) exemplify how the physical size of a work has little to do with the overall complexity of the story. Because Hempel “strips” her stories to a much greater

extent than the other writers examined in this study (many of Hempel's stories are less than two pages in length), readers must pay particular attention, and often read sentences, paragraphs, or perhaps entire stories a number of times to find lasting meaning.

Chapter V, the final chapter in this study, examines how minimalist characteristics influence a number of works written by American novelist, Cormac McCarthy. Prior to 2006, the year in which McCarthy published both his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Road*, and a screenplay, *The Sunset Limited*, the works of McCarthy were rarely labeled minimalist by literary scholars. However, with these recent publications, and to a lesser extent the publication of *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy has begun a new and radically different chapter in his complex and impressive writing career by continuing to employ increasing amounts of minimalist techniques in his stories. The overwhelming attention given to McCarthy's latest works by both literary critics and mainstream readers supports my argument that when used by skilled authors, minimalist writing can have a profound effect on readers.

The Road and *The Sunset Limited* are McCarthy's newest and most minimalist texts; therefore, I focus much of my attention in Chapter V examining both how and why minimalist characteristics are used in these two works. *The Road* can be classified as a minimalist novel for a number of reasons. The novel consists of just two primary characters, a young boy and his father; neither of the characters is given a name in the work. Furthermore, readers never learn the exact ages of the characters, and because former education, work status, and

other historical information no longer matters in the post-apocalyptic world of the novel, such personal identifiers are also omitted. Readers learn a great deal about the father and son by watching their actions, observing memories of the past related by the narrator, and also through a number of dream sequences expressed by both the narrator and the father, but as is common in minimalist stories, the frequent bursts of dialogue between the father and son are always abrupt and to the point. Early in the novel, for instance, the following lines comprise an entire short section of the work:

He was a long time going to sleep. After a while he turned and looked at the man. His face in the small light streaked with black from the rain like some old world thespian. Can I ask you something? he said.

Yes. Of course.

Are we going to die?

Sometime. Not now.

And we're still going south.

Yes.

So we'll be warm.

Yes.

Okay.

Okay what?

Nothing. Just okay.

Go to sleep.

Okay.

I'm going to blow out the lamp. Is that okay?

Yes. That's okay.

And then later in the darkness: Can I ask you something?

Yes. Of course you can.

What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you.

Okay. (10-11)

Reminiscent of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," this particular section of the novel consists almost exclusively of dialogue. The father answers his son's questions during the brief discussion, but his responses are short and to the point. The dialogue is certainly used to inform readers that the man and son are suffering as they travel south in search of a warmer climate, but more importantly, the minimalist technique of omitting all unnecessary information invites readers to focus their attention on what is stated between the lines and matters most in this particular novel—the father and son share a deep and loving bond that can never be broken.

Unlike traditional minimalist stories like Hempel's "Rapture of the Deep" or Carver's "They're not your Husband," which generally take place in comfortable indoor settings, *The Road* is set in a number of different venues because the characters are constantly on the move and struggling to survive. In the story, the

protagonists travel through mountains, sleep in dilapidated houses and vehicles, and eventually make it to the beach, their final destination. Although minimalist stories are generally set in a single domestic space to create a feeling of comfort and familiarity, the mix of desperate, even deadly indoor and outdoor settings employed in *The Road* in a sense still classifies as minimalist because no matter where the journey takes the characters, the world is burnt, dying, or dead. Gray is the primary color used in the story as ash covers everything in sight. Also common to minimalist works, the main action that destroys the world in which the boy and father live takes place before the novel begins. Furthermore, the act itself is mentioned only a single time in the novel and not until the novel is well underway. The devastating event which leads to the apocalypse is related by the narrator in just two vague sentences: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (52). This short description seems to suggest a series of bombs, but because nothing more is mentioned about the incident, a careless reader might miss this vital detail altogether.

The physical structure of *The Road* is also minimalist in nature. The title itself is extremely simple, yet it suggests a myriad of possible meanings. Does the title simply refer to the actual road on which the father and son travel? Does the title perhaps metaphorically represent the journey of the two main characters? Does the road symbolically represent a final beacon of hope? The novel is also related as one continuous narrative with no sections, chapter breaks, or headings. This minimalist choice works well, considering that McCarthy wants readers to focus on the difficult journey of the father and son

and their endearing relationship more than anything else. Like many of McCarthy's earlier novels, punctuation marks are used sparingly in *The Road*. Rather than slow the action or halt the journey with commas and periods, McCarthy regularly uses connecting words like "and" and "or" throughout *The Road*. McCarthy uses this technique to describe one of the most beautiful memories shared in the novel: "In that long ago somewhere very near this place he'd watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowsy plumage in the still autumn air" (20). Reminiscent of Hemingway in stories such as "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," McCarthy also omits all unnecessary reference tags like "he said," "she said," "the doctor said," etc. throughout *The Road*.

In McCarthy's minimalist play, *The Sunset Limited*, two characters, referred to only as "Black" and "White," sit in Black's small tenement apartment discussing their past lives and distinct world views. The primary action which brought the two strangers together has already occurred—Black saved White's life by pushing him off the tracks of the Sunset Limited subway train, thwarting White's suicide attempt.

As suggested by McCarthy's subtitle, "A Novel in Dramatic Form," dialogue takes center stage in this particular story. Both characters have much to say, but productive communication between the two is often impossible because the characters are radically different. Without question, Black is generally concerned about White and hopes to convince him that life is still worth

living. However, White is highly educated and extremely well spoken, whereas Black is uneducated and struggles to express himself through words. These and other issues pose serious problems in the characters' attempts to communicate, as White's ideas are often extremely complex. Early in the story, for example, White invents a character named Cecil to explain why his life is no longer worth living. Instead of focusing on the main idea expressed by White in the analogy, Black is instead sidetracked by the fact that he doesn't personally know the man named Cecil. Similarly, because Black is a God-fearing Christian, he often uses Biblical references in his attempt to save White from attempting suicide once again upon leaving his apartment. Unfortunately for Black, White doesn't consider himself a Christian, or even a believer in a Higher Power. For this reason, Black's religious-based attempts to save White's life are useless. Because all attempts at effective communication between the two characters fail, the story ends with White leaving the apartment still intent on killing himself. Black has done all he can to save White through his words, but as is often true in minimalist works, "real" communication is ultimately impossible.

Although McCarthy's highly philosophical novel *The Crossing* is in most ways a non-minimalist text, I argue that the unreliable narrators used throughout the work, including both the primary, third-person narrator and many of the secondary narrators and characters epitomize the minimalist definition of the unreliable narrator. Carver scholar Gunter Leypoldt effectively discusses how the minimalist version of the unreliable narrator differs from the traditional definition in his article, "Raymond Carver's 'Development.'" Leypoldt writes:

[The] minimalist version of the unreliable narrator achieves its destabilizing effects precisely because its unreliability cannot be relied upon. By offering merely faint intimations that there may be a slightly neurotic or compulsive element involved, an occasional blurring of perspective, the text does not ironize the speaker completely, but merely puts the story's voice in invisible quotation marks, intimating that parts of the narration may be flawed without, however, stating exactly which ones. (326)

Similar to how Leyboldt uses the minimalist definition of unreliability to examine Carver's "So Much Water So Close To Home," I propose that McCarthy infuses *The Crossing* with subtle clues, suggesting that most of the primary narrators in the novel are "slightly neurotic" or confused; this in turn forces readers to question whether or not the narrators should be trusted. Although statements made by a number of important characters suggest that *The Crossing* is "a story about storytelling," because the reliability of characters such as the ex-priest, blind man, gypsy, trapper and even the primary narrator is questionable at best, ambiguity dominates the novel and readers are left alone to decide exactly what to make of the various stories.

I conclude Chapter V discussing how McCarthy's writing continues to evolve from a dense and highly complex style that was once commonly compared to Faulkner to a simple, and in many ways more accessible style, that, beginning with *No Country for Old Men*, borrows from and adds to the minimalist framework laid by Beckett, Hemingway and other early minimalist writers. In this

portion of the chapter, particular emphasis is given to how the minimalist tool of repetition is used throughout *No Country for Old Men* to both heighten suspense and reinforce important information vital to a reader's understanding of the novel.

CHAPTER II
ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S CONTRIBUTION
TO LITERARY MINIMALISM

Ernest Hemingway is arguably the best known and most influential American fiction writer of the twentieth century. His innovative writing style is characterized by simple diction, understatement, and short, declarative sentences expressed primarily through dialogue. Like Raymond Carver, Cormac McCarthy and countless other writers that continue to be influenced by his style, Hemingway is not exclusively a minimalist writer. However, in many of his highly acclaimed short stories, including "Big Two-Hearted River," "Hills Like White Elephants," "A Canary For One," "Cat in the Rain," "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and even in the Pulitzer Prize winning tale, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway uses a number of minimalist techniques such as heavy dialogue, repetition and ambiguous narrators and situations to shape the stories and forever change the landscape of American fiction.

According to Hemingway's "Theory of Omission" that which *isn't* directly stated in a well-written story is often equal to, if not more important than what actually *is* stated on the page (*Death in the Afternoon* 102). Naturally, an unskilled writer can damage a story by omitting information that is vital for the reader's understanding. Conversely, when performed by skilled minimalist writers, omissions can actually strengthen a story as they invite readers to apply their own ideas, life experiences and moral values to the work, potentially resulting in deeper and more meaningful readings of texts. As Harold Bloom

notes in his introduction to *Modern Critical Interpretations: Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea*, "Hemingway's greatness is in his short stories, which rival any other master of the form, be it Joyce or Chekhov or Isaak Babel The art of ellipsis, or leaving things out, indeed is the great virtue of Hemingway's best short stories" (2). According to Bloom, "Hemingway stated his pride in what he considered to be the aesthetic economy of *The Old Man and the Sea*" in an interview with George Plimpton:

The Old Man and the Sea could have been over a thousand pages long and had every character in the village in it and all the processes of the way they made their living, were born, educated, bore children, etc. That is done excellently and well by other writers. In writing you are limited by what has already been done satisfactorily. So I have tried to learn to do something else. First, I have tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader so that after he or she has read something it will become part of his or her experience and seem actually to have happened. This is very hard to do and I've worked at it very hard. (1)

Instead of praising the novella, Bloom argues that *The Old Man and the Sea* fails to showcase Hemingway's trademark, economical style, and concludes his introduction with a scathing attack aimed at both Faulkner and Hemingway:

William Faulkner praised *The Old Man and the Sea* as being Hemingway's best work, but then Faulkner also considered

Thomas Wolfe to be the greatest American novelist of the century.

The story, far from Hemingway's best, cannot be both a parable of Christian redemption and of a novelist's triumph, not so much because these are incompatible, but because so repetitive and self-indulgent a narrative cannot bear that double burden

Hemingway himself is so moved by Hemingway that his famous, laconic style yields to uncharacteristic overwriting. (2-3)

Bloom's words are a bit surprising when one considers that he is introducing a collection of reviews and articles examining Hemingway's best known work. Upon reading Bloom's introduction, readers might expect to find a book packed with articles criticizing Hemingway's novella, but this is hardly the case. William Faulkner's review, which immediately follows Bloom's introduction, begins, "His best. Time may show it to be the best single piece of any of us, I mean his and my contemporaries" (5). Carlos Baker writes in the opening line of "The Boy and the Lions," "The relationship between Santiago and the boy Manolo is of a special and memorable kind" (7). Perhaps the most praiseworthy comment from another of Hemingway's contemporaries is given by Delmore Schwartz in the opening line of "*The Old Man and the Sea* and the American Dream": "*The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway's most recent novel (1952), is not so much a masterpiece in itself as a virtuoso performance, a new demonstration of the novelist's gifts far more than a new development of them" (21). To be fair to both Hemingway and Bloom, I agree that *The Old Man and the Sea* is not the most "economical" or best Hemingway story, but it succeeds as a minimalist story on a

number of levels.¹ The story is certainly too long to be considered a short story, but this fact, in and of itself, does not necessarily suggest that Hemingway failed to omit all but the most necessary information; it would be difficult if not impossible to detail Santiago's two-day struggle with the marlin in just a few pages. Furthermore, and as Hemingway notes in the interview with George Plimpton, the novella-length story "could have been over a thousand pages long" had he chosen to populate the "village" (1). By focusing primarily on the events surrounding the fishing trip, Hemingway successfully limits the story to a novella-length work. In another minimalist move, the story both begins and ends with the elderly Santiago speaking with the youthful Manolin about seemingly trivial things such as baseball, food and fishing. Considering that both Manolin and Santiago depend on fishing for their survival, however, such conversations are more important than they initially seem. In both the opening and closing pages of the novella, the dialogue between the two characters is characteristic of Hemingway's simple, trademark writing style:

"What do you have to eat?" the boy asked.

"A pot of yellow rice with fish. Do you want some?"

"No. I will eat at home. Do you want me to make the fire?"

"No. I will make it later on. Or I may eat the rice cold."

"May I take the cast net?"

"Of course." (16)

¹ "Hills Like White Elephants," "A Canary For One" and "Cat in the Rain" are widely considered to be Hemingway's most minimalist works.

Because Hemingway's primary focus is that of telling a story of a single old man at sea, Manolin is absent for the majority of the novella. David Timms indirectly discusses the minimalist nature of the setting and characterization in *The Old Man and the Sea* when he writes:

. . . [T]he whole situation of Santiago—he is far out at sea and is materially impoverished anyway—is one that admits of little in the way of physical description, but then that is my point: the novella is well-adapted to such narrow settings.

The same is true of character, partly in simple quantitative terms: the novella finds it hard to accommodate a large cast. *The Old Man and the Sea* abides by the suggestions of the form in having only two major parts (the fish and the man), one supporting actor (Manolin), and a few bit-parts. (160)

For most of the novella, Hemingway provides readers with no choice but to focus on the difficult task at hand by confining Santiago to his small fishing boat in the middle of the ocean as he battles both a huge marlin and a handful of sharks. Santiago is a seasoned and capable fisherman, but moments after hooking the marlin, the minimalist tool of repetition is used to suggest that Santiago may be in trouble. Echoing the early dialogue between Santiago and Manolin, Santiago continues to think about food, especially when his ability to eat is hampered by the fact that he is battling a fishing rod connected to a monstrous fish. Just a few

short moments after encouraging the marlin to “eat” the bait a “little more,” Santiago begins to think about his own need to eat (44). This thought, or a variation thereof, is repeated in the text four different times:

- I. “No one should be alone in their old age, he thought. But it is unavoidable. I must remember to eat the tuna before he spoils in order to keep strong. Remember, no matter how little you want to, that you must eat him in the morning. Remember, he said to himself” (48).
- II. “Now I will pay attention to my work and then I must eat the tuna so that I will not have a failure of strength” (56).
- III. “Now,” he said, when his hand had dried, ‘I must eat the small tuna. I can reach him with the gaff and eat him here in comfort” (57).
- IV. “He picked up a piece and put it in his mouth and chewed it slowly. It was not unpleasant. Chew it well, he thought, and get all the juices. It would not be bad to eat with a little lime or with lemon or salt” (58).

Critics like Bloom might consider the repetition used in these particular passages to be a bit excessive, but Hemingway’s intent in repeating the idea is clear. In the same way in which he had encouraged the marlin to “eat” the bait, Santiago must continually encourage himself to eat. As Santiago finishes the final bites of tuna, the close, even loving connection between him and the marlin becomes clear: “I wish I could feed the fish, he thought. He is my brother. But I must kill

him and keep strong to do it. Slowly and conscientiously he ate all of the wedge-shaped strips of fish” (59). It is important to note that during this episode Santiago also repeats on six different occasions that he wishes the boy was with him.² In the first four instances in which the thought is mentioned, Santiago’s wish to have the boy with him directly relates to the fact that he could use Manolin’s help to land the marlin. The fifth and sixth times that Santiago wishes that Manolin was present, however, indirectly expresses Santiago’s father-like love for the boy. Immediately after reminding himself to pay attention to his work and eat the tuna, Santiago states, “I wish the boy were here and that I had some salt” (56). In the same way that Santiago connects himself with the marlin through his references to food, in mentioning “the boy” and food in the same sentence, the argument can be made that Manolin is equally, if not more important to Santiago than the fish that he now considers as a brother. The final mention of his desire to have Manolin with him, “If the boy were here he could rub it [his cramping hand] for me and loosen it down from the forearm” (62) supports my claim that repetition is used throughout this episode to highlight both the special bond that Santiago had previously created with the boy, and the growing bond that continues to form with the fish during the lengthy battle at sea.

Throughout his career, but most notably during the mid to late 1920s, Hemingway practiced and honed many of the techniques expressed in his

² According to Gerry Brenner, Santiago’s wishes to have Manolin with him on the fishing trip can be interpreted in a number of ways: “Santiago utters these wishes, of course, because he needs help with the huge marlin. And Hemingway asks us to hear them as prayers. With one ear I do. But with the other I hear their resentment and anger: that the boy, Manolin, is not with him, that Manolin obeyed his parents’ orders to fish in another boat, that Manolin has not vowed discipleship to Santiago. The malice in Santiago’s wishes makes me ask, is he truly a “strange old man,” as he calls himself; or is he quite ordinary, as much a hypocrite as the next person, as deficient in self-awareness as the rest of us?” (142).

“Iceberg Principle.” The stories “Big Two-Hearted River” and “Hills Like White Elephants” highlight the most striking and influential minimalist techniques used by Hemingway in many of his works—the use of repetition as a means to present necessary information, including the repetition of words, phrases and ideas, and the use of heavy dialogue and limited exposition to create a sense of verisimilitude which invites readers to actively participate in the story-telling process.

Repetition in “Big Two-Hearted River: Part I”

Hemingway first introduced American readers to his innovative style of writing in a collection of short stories titled *In Our Time* (1925). The collection includes sixteen stories, seven of which follow the exploits of Hemingway’s first “hero,” Nick Adams. Minimalist trademarks including settings dominated by tight domestic places (“The Killers”), stories involving just two primary characters (“The Three Day Blow”), and ambiguous conversations often too complex for Nick to fully comprehend (“Indian Camp”) dominate many of the Nick Adams stories. Most Hemingway scholars agree that “Big Two-Hearted River” is the best written work involving Nick Adams, but like most of the Nick Adams stories, its valuable contribution to the study of minimalism is often overshadowed by Hemingway’s other great minimalist works including “Cat in the Rain,” “Hills Like White Elephants” and “A Canary For One,” which were also written during the mid to late 1920s.³

³ Sheridan Baker states that “Big Two-Hearted River” is “the central Nick Adams story” (142). Elizabeth J. Wells argues that “Big Two-Hearted River” presents “the most extreme

In an interview with Hemingway following the publication of *In Our Time*, Dean Gauss and Scott Fitzgerald quipped with respect to “Big Two-Hearted River” that Hemingway “had written a story in which nothing happened,” and therefore, the story lacked “human interest” (Smith 88). Hemingway responded to this accusation stating that as “ordinary book reviewers [Gauss and Fitzgerald] hadn’t taken the trouble to find out what he had been trying to do” (Baker 125). Considering that Hemingway’s minimalist style of writing was new and unique in the mid 1920’s, it is not surprising that Gauss and Fitzgerald failed to understand what Hemingway was attempting to accomplish in his first collection of short stories. “Big Two-Hearted River,” the final story in the *In Our Time* collection, is much more than just a compelling story about a boy’s fishing trip. It is one of the first great minimalist texts in which repetition is used to both reveal and reinforce important ideas, seemingly hidden in plain view just below the surface of the story.

The narrator first uses repetition in the opening paragraph of the story to introduce Nick’s potential for positive change:

The train went on up the track out of sight, around one of the hills of burnt timber. Nick sat down on the bundle of canvas and bedding the baggage man had pitched out of the door of the baggage car. There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House

example of the Hemingway style (a model for a modern, no-nonsense, prose style) to be found in his earlier stories” (129).

hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was chipped and split by the fire. It was all that was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground. (209)

The narrator repeats the word “burned” or a variation thereof three times in the opening paragraph to describe the current state of the town. The word “fire” is also used to explain why the stone of the Mansion House hotel was “chipped” and “split.” The narrator states multiple times and in distinct ways that Seney and the accompanying landscape was destroyed by fire in order to create a lonely feeling of desperation. Of the eight sentences used to open the story, seven relate either directly or indirectly to the “burnt” condition of Seney. The second sentence is of particular importance as it is used to position the protagonist amongst the ruins as the baggage man “pitch[es]” Nick’s bags at the doorstep of the charred city. The narrator never directly states that Nick, like Seney, is experiencing a difficult time in his life, but a careful reading of the opening pages suggests that this is initially the case. Beginning in the second paragraph, however, the focus shifts from the town of Seney to Nick, and it soon becomes evident that in contrast to the doomed fate of the town, there is still hope for the protagonist.

Throughout “Big Two-Hearted River” the narrator describes Nick’s every move but rarely enters Nick’s mind. For this reason, it is vital that readers consider the manner in which the highly objective narrator delivers information when outlining Nick’s actions. For example, the narrator provides a detailed yet

minimalist description of the mundane act of balancing the weight of a backpack to emphasize Nick's potential and growth:

Nick walked back up the ties to where his pack lay in the cinders beside the railway track. He was happy. He adjusted the pack harness around the bundle, pulling the straps tight, slung the pack on his back, got his arms through the shoulder straps and took some of the pull off his shoulders by leaning his forehead against the wide band of the tump-line. Still, it was too heavy. It was much too heavy. He had his leather rod-case in his hand and leaning forward to keep the weight of the pack high on his shoulders he walked along the road that paralleled the railway track, leaving the burned town behind in the heat, and then turned off around a hill with a high, fire-scarred hill on either side onto a road that went back into the country. He walked along the road feeling the ache from the pull of the heavy pack. The road climbed steadily. It was hard work walking up-hill. His muscles ached and the day was hot, but Nick felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him.

(210)

Had the focus of this paragraph been simply to provide a snapshot of the beginning of Nick's journey by describing the weight of the pack, the idea could have been expressed in a sentence or two—"The heavy pack made it hard for Nick to walk," or "Nick would not be able to carry the pack for long." From a

stylistic and metaphorical standpoint, however, this paragraph is much more than just a trivial passage about a backpack. The stuffed backpack is clearly heavy and literally hard to carry, but Nick's "real" struggle, which is never directly revealed by the narrator, weighs much more heavily on the protagonist's mind than does the backpack on his shoulders. The short, declarative statements inserted amongst the much longer and more detailed statements describing Nick's actions reinforce this idea. The first declarative statement is presented in the second sentence of the paragraph: "He was happy." Had this observation been expressed in just this particular episode of the story, it could be dismissed as nothing but an unimportant, casual remark regarding Nick's current emotional state. Because the thought is restated later in the passage as "Nick felt happy," and expressed a total of four times in Part I of the story, the assumption can be made that Nick has not always been happy. In fact, it is quite possible that Nick has not been happy for some time. This particular reading provides a likely motive for Nick's fishing trip; he wishes to be happy once again and hopes that the river will take his mind off of whatever is bothering him. The final lines of the paragraph, "He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him" supports this particular interpretation of the text.

Readers are never told exactly what is troubling Nick, but the second and third declarative statements found in the passage prove that Nick's biggest struggle, which has occurred sometime and someplace outside the story, continues to affect him on an emotional level. The narrator states in lines three

and four, again in direct reference to the weight of the backpack, “Still, it was too heavy. It was much too heavy.” Through repetition, the narrator again reminds readers that just as the weight of Nick’s backpack makes it difficult for him to physically climb the hill, on a figurative, and more important level, the undisclosed mental burden is still “too heavy” for Nick to bear or even think about at this particular stage of the story. For this reason, in place of facing his mental demons, Nick seeks an escape route and heads for the river.

Immediately following the passage describing the weight of the backpack, the narrator returns for the second time to the town of Seney to build on many of the ideas expressed in the opening paragraph. In contrast to the bleak and hopeless tone of the opening section, in this alternative version of the introduction, the primary focus is on Nick’s potential, not the burnt landscape:

From the time he had gotten down off the train and the baggage man had thrown his pack out of the open car door things had been different. Seney was burned, the country was burned over and changed, but it did not matter. It could not all be burned. He knew that. He hiked along the road, sweating in the sun, climbing to cross the range of hills that separated the railway from the pine plains. (210-11)

In this passage, Hemingway uses repetition to remind readers that Seney and the surrounding landscape was destroyed by fire and has no hope for recovery. The narrator’s description of the burnt town of Seney represents the beginning, but not the end of Nick’s journey. As Nick continues to walk away from Seney

and toward his fishing hole, he comes to the realization that “not all [is] burned.” Nick’s thoughts, much like the landscape itself, improve with each step, but he still faces a long and difficult journey. Much like the struggle detailed in the backpack episode, the final sentence states that Nick suffers and sweats as he continues his upward “climb” across the Northern Michigan hills. Nick’s two-fold journey, literally towards the river and figuratively towards mental healing, will continue to be challenging; but due to his positive attitude in the face of adversity, there is hope for Nick.

One of the most noticeable instances of repetition in Part I of “Big Two-Hearted River” is found in a short paragraph consisting of sixteen simple sentences used to highlight Nick’s greatest moment of success. At the end of the first day, Nick sets up camp and prepares for the night. The narrator then expresses Nick’s feelings with respect to the day’s events:

Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it. Now he was hungry. (215)

In an article titled, “A Statistical Analysis of the Prose Style of Ernest Hemingway: ‘Big Two-Hearted River,’” Elizabeth Wells supports the argument that repetition is primarily used in the story to plot Nick’s growth and potential. According to

Wells, “Repetition of the word ‘done’ expresses the finality of Nick’s accomplishment. Repetition of the word ‘now,’ especially at the beginning of the sentences, gives the impression of shelving the past and looking with hope toward the future” (134). Wells’ interpretation is insightful, but it is also worth noting that Hemingway uses repetition in the opening lines to contrast Nick’s current “happy” state to the many “unhappy” days that he has experienced in the past. Similarly, in the final lines of the paragraph the narrator repeats the phrase “good place,” first in reference to the camp, and then, more importantly, in reference to Nick’s current emotional state. Through hard work and perseverance, Nick has overcome all obstacles on the first day of his journey from Seney to the river. For at least the moment, Nick is “happy,” both physically and emotionally, to again be in a “good place.”

Heavy Dialogue and Ambiguity in “Hills Like White Elephants”

Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” was first published in a 1927 collection of short stories titled *Men Without Women*. As is true of most Hemingway stories, scholars have written countless articles examining all facets of the work. The ambiguous resolution, the striking symbolism of the setting and title, and also the strained relationship of the two characters are topics commonly examined by critics.⁴ The unique and innovative manner in which dialogue is

⁴ For an insightful analysis of the symbolic nature of the title, see Lewis E. Weeks’ article, “Hemingway Hills: Symbolism in ‘Hills Like White Elephants.’” Nilofer Hashmi discusses both the ambiguous ending and the troubling relationship of the two characters in “‘Hills Like White Elephants’: The Jilting of Jig.” Paul Rankin also discusses the strained relationship between Jig and the American. According to Rankin, “Hemingway’s unnamed American male protagonist dominates the meeker, weaker-sexed Jig—the *other* in terms of her femaleness, her youth (she is the girl as opposed to the *woman* who tends bar), and her foreignness (because he receives the

used in “Hills Like White Elephants,” however, marks not only the most important minimalist element of the story, but arguably Hemingway’s greatest single contribution to literary minimalism.

Similar to “Big Two-Hearted River,” little actually happens in “Hills Like White Elephants.” The story begins and ends with a couple sitting in the shade outside a bar, waiting for a train en route from Barcelona to Madrid. The conversation between characters is expressed almost exclusively through dialogue and marks the most salient minimalist feature of the story. As Robert Paul Lamb notes in “Hemingway and the Creation of Twentieth-Century Dialogue”:

[Dialogue] is not generally effective as a means of exposition, of conveying necessary information . . . , it can express present relationships and, by implication, their past as well. But to do so effectively requires great talent; dialogue must imply subtly, suggestively, and never through direct statement. Usually, the way characters say something is more important than what they say.

(455)

Because narrative exposition is used sparingly throughout “Hills Like White Elephants,” readers must rely heavily, at times even exclusively, on what is directly stated by the characters. The conversation revolves around the man’s desire to abort his partner’s baby, but as many critics have observed, the words

specific national identification, we may deduce that it’s meant to distinguish his from hers)—until, broken, she submits to his will and consents to aborting the child” (234). I agree with much of Rankin’s argument, but the text itself never specifically mentions that Jig aborts the child.

abortion, baby and pregnancy are never actually used in the story.⁵ Instead, the couple uses ambiguous terms such as “it” and “things” when referring to all matters related to the situation: “if you [Jig] don’t want to you don’t have to. I wouldn’t have you do it if you didn’t want to. But I know it’s perfectly simple” (275). When expressed as dialogue, indirect language can quickly undermine a story if used to the extent that readers no longer find meaning in the work. For instance, had Hemingway written “Hills Like White Elephants” primarily to educate readers about abortion, it would certainly be necessary to include the actual word somewhere in the text. Although the conversation between characters revolves around the issue of abortion and serves as the catalyst behind the argument, the minimalist dialogic patterns used throughout the story support the theory that “Hills Like White Elephants” is primarily about the man’s desire to regain control over Jig and the relationship through the abortion of the baby.

The story opens with a short narrative paragraph which sets the scene and introduces the two characters. The protagonists, called simply “the American” and “the girl,” sit at a station waiting for a train. At this early point in the story, the exact relationship between the two is a mystery. It is clear, however, that the couple is about to continue their journey to an undisclosed location, which, considering the conversation, might possibly be an abortion

⁵ Cynthia Hallett argues that Hemingway uses the pronoun “it” throughout “Hills Like White Elephants” in an attempt to make the debate between the man and Jig relatable on a personal level: “Because the actual source of the conflict between the couple is most often referred to simply as “it”—actually referring to the problem in various forms (it, the abortion; it, the baby; it, the problem)—the vagueness of this pronoun allows the conflict to be about anything that might complicate or contaminate the relationship between a man and a woman” (39).

clinic. The vague, at times heated conversation between the man and Jig begins in the second paragraph. Pamela Smiley writes in “Gender-Linked Miscommunication in ‘Hills Like White Elephants,’” “The dialogue contains the essence of the story’s power; for to read Jig’s and the American’s conversation is to recognize the powerless frustration of parallel interchanges—in different words, in different places, and on different topics, but all somehow the same” (81). Similar to how the characters are positioned in the midst of the journey, waiting at a junction between Barcelona and Madrid, the ambiguous manner in which the two talk about the possibility of abortion suggests not only that the two have discussed this particular issue before, but also that the characters, and particularly the male protagonist, is not sure how he should approach the topic. The conversation between characters begins:

“What should we drink?” the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

“It’s pretty hot,” the man said.

“Let’s drink beer.”

“Dos cervezas,” the man said to the curtain.

“Big ones?” a woman asked from the doorway.

“Yes. Two big ones.” (273)

The verbal exchange between characters begins with a simple question—“What should we drink?” The actual age of the female protagonist is never revealed, but because she is referred to as “the girl,” and not “the woman” both here and throughout the story, the assumption can be made that the female character is

younger than “the American,” who is referred to as “the man” throughout the story. It is important to note that “the girl” (Jig) both begins the conversation and eventually ends the dialogue between characters when she states in the final lines of the story, “There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine” (278). Jig is the primary character and the focal point of the entire discussion, but the dialogue is dominated by the male character, most notably when he attempts to convince Jig that she should have the “operation.” It is evident from the first spoken line in the story that the man, not Jig, desires to control the relationship. Through a simple question, “What should we drink?” the male character is placed in a position of power. Because there are no reference tags attached to the third and last statements of this initial exchange, “Let’s drink beer” and “Yes. Two big ones,” it is unclear which of the two characters is actually speaking. Because the male character orders the drinks, it is likely that he would also be the one to respond to the waitress’ question in the final line. It is less clear, however, which of the two characters speaks the third statement and actually chooses the drinks. In his minimalist stories, Hemingway commonly omits reference tags in dialogue. This stylistic choice creates a sense of verisimilitude, as tags like “he said,” and “she said” are often unnecessary and therefore omitted from actual conversations. This trademark alone fits the “definition” of minimalism as it applies to the structure of a work, but in choosing to omit the reference tag in both the third sentence and other key moments, Hemingway opens the story to multiple readings. Considering that “Hills Like White Elephants” is a highly ambiguous story, the decision to omit certain reference tags should not come as a surprise

to readers. If readers choose to believe that Jig selects the drinks, they might view her as one that can make her own decisions. On the other hand, because the male character is initially asked the question and is also placed in a position of power over “the girl” when introduced to the story as “the man,” it seems likely that when given the chance to make even a small decision such as ordering a particular type of drink for the couple, he would welcome the opportunity to do so.

The second dialogue-driven passage in “Hills Like White Elephants” supports Hemingway’s belief as outlined in the “Iceberg Principle” that what is actually stated in a text is often less important than how it is stated (192). In the passage, the man responds defensively to Jig’s remark that he had never seen a white elephant:

“They look like white elephants,” she said.

“I’ve never seen one,” the man drank his beer.

“No, you wouldn’t have.”

“I might have,” the man said. “Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything.” (273)

Certain critics interested in the symbolic nature of “Hills Like White Elephants” note how the opening line of this conversation directly relates to the title of the story.⁶ The expression “white elephant” is commonly used to describe an item that is no longer wanted by its owner and is therefore given to another, often as a playful gift. A less common meaning for “white elephant,” however, fits the story even better. Much different than the popular definition, the phrase “white

⁶ Lewis E. Weeks argues that “the symbolism implicit in the title and developed in the story contributes more than any other single quality to the powerful impact” (75).

elephant” can also be used to describe an expensive or rare possession that an owner can no longer maintain. The financial status of the couple is never revealed, but considering the selfish and controlling nature of the male protagonist who openly states that he wants nothing to change how things “were before [the pregnancy],” this lesser known definition gives even greater meaning to the story. Although the term “abortion” is never used in the text, the dialogue between characters clearly revolves around the man’s efforts to convince Jig that she should abort the baby. For this reason, from the male character’s perspective the unborn baby is viewed as nothing but a “white elephant.” Furthermore, it is also possible that the man views Jig as a “white elephant” simply because she is the person carrying the baby. The argument can also be made that because the male protagonist cares more about himself than anyone else and attempts to manipulate both Jig’s thoughts and actions throughout the story, he is the “white elephant” that needs to be discarded. Regardless of whether or not readers choose to view the male protagonist as a “white elephant,” his startling response to Jig’s statement that he had never before seen a white elephant reveals a great deal about the man’s selfish character.

The dialogue between characters begins with the male protagonist responding to Jig’s observation, “They [the hills] look like white elephants” with “I’ve never seen one” (273). Although the man had just admitted that he had never before seen a white elephant, he appears both angered and offended by Jig’s reply, “No, you wouldn’t have.” Rather than simply agreeing with Jig, or perhaps saying nothing at all, the man chooses first to alter his response, “I might

have,” and then proceeds to berate Jig, “Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything” (273). According to Paul Rankin, the man’s angry response to Jig’s “playful banter about the similarity between hills and elephants” provides evidence that the man has an inferiority complex (235).⁷ This is a valid interpretation considering that the man appears to be challenged by Jig and therefore feels the need to defend himself when Jig agrees that he had never before seen a white elephant. However, and especially when readers consider that Hemingway relies on the minimalist technique of withholding as much information as he reveals through the heavy use of dialogue in this particular story, it is also possible that Jig’s response relates to an earlier conversation or action known only by the two characters. Regardless of whether or not readers fully understand the exact meaning behind Jig’s statement and the man’s ensuing reply, it is important that readers catch the subtle change in mood which begins during this episode and eventually transforms the conversation from a light-hearted discussion about beer and the landscape to a serious discussion on why the man feels that Jig should have an abortion.

“Hills Like White Elephants” represents one of Hemingway’s first great minimalist attempts to write a work driven almost exclusively by dialogue. For this reason, it is not surprising that the story ends with a lengthy conversation between characters. The primary structure of the conversation follows the minimalist pattern established in the beginning of the story as editorial commentary is limited and narrative exposition is virtually nonexistent. Perhaps

⁷ Pamela Smiley builds on this idea when writing, “Shutting down Jig’s attempt at intimacy with terse phrases and insistence on facts reveals the American’s attempts to control the conversation and, by extension, the relationship” (8).

more than any other dialogue-driven passage in the story, the final exchange between Jig and the male protagonist supports Hemingway's minimalist argument that the manner in which information is shared is often more telling and important than what is actually stated in the text. Immediately following Jig's remark that the two do nothing but "look at things and try new drinks" (274), the man begins his carefully crafted argument with hopes to convince Jig to see things his way. It is certainly possible that the man had been looking for an opportunity to speak to Jig about the abortion for some time, but the man's impetuous decision to begin the most important conversation in the entire story at such an awkward moment supports the argument that he is primarily concerned about controlling the relationship. Through his words, the man aims to prove not only to Jig but also to himself that he can do much more than simply "look at things and try new drinks" (274). The final and most important conversation in the story begins:

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said.

"It's not really an operation at all."

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."

"Then what will we do afterward?"

“We’ll be fine afterward. Just like we were before.”

“What makes you think so?”

“That’s the only thing that bothers us. It’s the only thing that’s made us unhappy.” (275)

Like most passages in the story, this particular episode is related primarily through dialogue as only two lines of narrative commentary are used. This not only highlights the important role that dialogue plays in the story, but the fact that Hemingway chose to include narrative commentary in this particular moment signals to readers that they should pay particular attention to what Hemingway is attempting to reveal through the narrator. The episode begins with the man’s attempts to downplay the seriousness of the operation. After the man states that “it” [an abortion] is “really an awfully simple operation,” and “It’s not really an operation at all,” the narrator momentarily interrupts the argument when stating, “The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.” Certain readers might miss the valuable information expressed through this brief interruption as the narrative commentary consists of just a single, uneventful line immediately followed by the continuation of the man’s argument. Upon hearing the man’s words, the narrator states that Jig’s eyes shift from the hills to the ground. In place of looking directly at the man, which would be an expected reaction considering that the man speaks directly to her and even calls her by name, Jig’s gaze moves from upward (towards the hills), to downward (towards the ground). Jig’s reaction strongly suggests that she is not yet convinced that she should have an abortion. The man picks up on the subtle clue revealed through Jig’s

gaze, but because he is determined to convince Jig to see things his way, he continues in his attempt to minimize the seriousness of the operation: "I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in." For the second time in the passage, the narrator interrupts the man to reveal Jig's reaction which in this instance comes in the form of a non-response: "The girl did not say anything." The fact that the girl chooses not to respond to the man can be interpreted in a number of ways and is of particular interest when one considers that the story is dominated by dialogue. Jig's non-response reaffirms that she doesn't agree with the man's views concerning the abortion. It is also possible that Jig chooses not to respond to the man because she understands that he wants nothing but for her to submissively agree with him. Finally, the line also applies to the overall minimalist structure of the work. The characters have a great deal to say, but the vague manner in which the two speak to each other, which is most notable during discussions about the central, yet never explicitly mentioned theme of abortion leaves certain critics and many first time Hemingway readers questioning what the lengthy discussion is even about.

To this point in the conversation, the argument has been dominated by the man's five failed attempts to minimize the seriousness of the operation. Upon realizing the ineffectiveness of this approach, the man attempts to change the focus of the argument when stating, "I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time." In offering to "go" and "stay" with Jig during the operation, the man finally attempts to connect with Jig on an emotional level. Jig's inquisitive reply, "Then what will we do afterward?" suggests that a loving and protecting response is

what she had hoped for all along. Realizing that this particular approach might work, the man provides a cursory answer, "We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before," and then he attempts to insert himself once again in the equation by stating, "That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy." At this early point in the discussion, some readers might erroneously take the man's lines at face value and view him as an honest character that loves Jig unconditionally. As the dialogue continues, however, the man's true intentions are revealed. Ironically, it is during the moment in which the man directly expresses his love for Jig that his selfish intent is most apparent. The dialogue continues:

"I think it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to."

"And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?"

"I love you now. You know I love you."

"I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?"

"I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry." (275)

In this third attempt to convince Jig that abortion is the best answer, the man alters his approach by stating that he only wants Jig to abort the baby if she wants to do so. Had this particular idea been expressed just a single time in the story, Jig and readers would be more inclined to believe the man. Because the

man repeats this statement or a variant thereof at least six times during the discussion, however, one can assume that he does so not just to manipulate Jig into believing that she has the final say in the abortion, but also to absolve himself of any guilt that the abortion might eventually cause (Lamb 470-71).⁸ In contrast to the selfish motives which control the man's words, Jig appears to be genuinely concerned about the relationship and wants nothing more than to feel loved and accepted. This desire is proven through many of Jig's questions such as "And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?" and "But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?" This fundamental difference concerning how the two view the abortion creates the central conflict in the story and shapes the manner in which the male protagonist delivers his argument. As Robert Lamb notes, "he [the male protagonist] ostensibly says what she wants to hear, [but] the way he says it reveals more than what he says. Not only does he avoid answering her questions, the juxtaposition of "I love you" and "I love it" speaks volumes about his true feelings" (470). Although the man openly professes his love to Jig, he either chooses to ignore or simply lacks the capacity to understand Jig's true feelings. For this reason, both Jig and readers have no choice but to question if the man can possibly love anyone other than himself.

⁸ For additional commentary concerning the American's attempt to "absolve himself" of "guilt" through aborting the child, Robert Paul Lamb's article, "Hemingway and the Creation of Twentieth-Century Dialogue."

In one of the most revealing and emotional passages of the entire story, the roles are momentarily reversed as Jig attempts to take control of the conversation by begging the man to stop talking:

“Would you do something for me now?”

“I’d do anything for you.”

“Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?” (277)⁹

True to his character, the man’s response again suggests that his “love” for Jig is at least partially disingenuous; he disregards her plea and makes one final effort to persuade through guilt, now playing the role of martyr: “But I don’t want you to . . . I don’t care anything about it.” Jig’s response, “I’ll scream,” (277) ends the primary conversation between characters and leads to the ambiguous conclusion which is also presented through dialogue:

“Do you feel better?” he asked.

“I feel fine,” she said. “There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine”
(278).

Because the story revolves around the potential abortion, some readers are disappointed to discover that Hemingway never reveals the fate of the unborn child. This is certainly an interesting question, but providing a conclusive answer would have revealed too much of the “iceberg” and undermined what Hemingway was attempting to “show,” rather than “tell,” in the story. Ironically, the story is dominated by dialogue, which is the primary tool used by human beings to

⁹ The repetitious title of Carver’s 1976 collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet. Please?* may have been borrowed from this particular line.

communicate, but below the surface and from a minimalist standpoint, “Hills Like White Elephants” is really a story about manipulation and miscommunication. Hemingway’s proves in “Hills Like White Elephants” and many other stories that his unique, minimalist manner of expressing dialogue can strengthen a story by inviting a myriad of possible interpretations. Without question, Hemingway’s revolutionary style will continue to influence contemporary writers of American fiction.

CHAPTER III
RAYMOND CARVER: "THE FATHER" OF
AMERICAN MINIMALISM

Poet and short story writer Raymond Carver burst onto the literary scene in 1976 with the publication of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* The collection includes twenty-two carefully crafted stories dealing with various struggles that the average person might encounter on a daily basis. Carver employs many techniques in this debut collection that would later be viewed as trademarks of his minimalist style, such as simple, yet precise prose, mundane settings and subject matter, and recalcitrant narrators that struggle to communicate effectively. For these and other reasons, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* is an important addition to the study of literary minimalism and contains many respected stories such as "Fat," "They're Not Your Husband," and "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" but the collection signals just the beginning of Carver's minimalist writing career. In his second major press collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), Carver experiments with minimalist techniques to an even greater extent, resulting in perhaps the best single collection of minimalist stories ever written.

Carver's early short story collections, published during the highpoint of the minimalist trend, brought new and unprecedented attention to the study of literary minimalism. In "Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence," Graham Clarke writes, "Carver's status as a short story writer has been

very much bound up with the 'minimalist' and 'maximalist' debate. And although Carver declared, 'who cares finally what they want to call the stories we write', he remains the quintessential minimalist, seemingly reducing to an absolute sparseness both his subject matter and his treatment of it" (103). Michael Gorra views Carver as "the chief practitioner of what's been called 'American Minimalism'" (Meyer 239). In *Minimalism and the Short Story*, Cynthia Hallet writes, "Most of the work in Carver's first three collections of short stories is perceived as the ultimate model of minimalist fiction" (43). Ironically, Carver's early success as a writer was due in large part to his unique minimalist style, yet he disliked being classified as a minimalist. In an interview with Mona Simpson, Carver states, "somebody called me a "minimalist" writer. But I didn't like it. There's something about "minimalism" that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don't like" (210). Regardless of whether or not Carver liked the term "minimalist," there is currently no better word to describe the sparse, exacting and economical writing style employed in many of his early stories. For instance, Carver's "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit" begins:

I've seen some things. I was going over to my mother's to stay a few nights. But just as I got to the top of the stairs, I looked and she was on the sofa kissing a man. It was summer. The door was open. The TV was going. That's one of the things I've seen.

(17)

The concise manner in which the narrator relates what he considers to be a shocking event resembles a still-life photograph where the viewer is presented

with little more than a “snap-shot” of the mother and man on the sofa. Carver attempts to satisfy readers by providing sufficient information for a basic understanding of the storyline, but, because the paragraph is delivered as a simple list of events and descriptions, readers must work to find concrete answers. For instance, Carver never reveals why the man is staying at his mother’s house, which leads readers to wonder if perhaps he is visiting on vacation, in town on work, or perhaps visiting for some other reason. Perhaps the biggest question of all, which is highlighted by the fact that the narrator both begins and ends the paragraph with a version of “I’ve seen some things,” is “Why does this particular event come as such a shock to the narrator?” Because the character who kissed the protagonist’s mother is never named and referred to only as “a man,” it is safe to assume that he is not the protagonist’s father. So is the father still living? Is he still married to, or otherwise connected with the mother? Is the son simply shocked by the fact that his mother is kissing someone other than his father? These and other questions, created by the direct and extremely sparse manner in which the story is told, invite readers to continue reading in hopes of making sense of the story.

Arthur Bethea, James Plath, Larry McCaffery and other notable scholars argue that some of the minimalist techniques used by Carver in his early collections resemble similar techniques practiced by Ernest Hemingway.¹ Carver

¹ Carver states the following in response to McCaffery’s suggestion that Hemingway “affected” Carver’s “literary sensibility”: “Hemingway was certainly an influence. I didn’t read him until I was in college and then I read the wrong book (*Across the River and Into the Trees*) and didn’t like him very much. But a little later I read *In Our Time* in a class and I found that he was marvelous. I remember thinking, ‘This is *it*; if you can write prose like this, you’ve done something” (75).

readily acknowledged that his writing owed a great deal to Hemingway's "Iceberg Principle," but he often challenged claims that his writing style was actually "influenced" by Hemingway (Clarke, 108).² Graham Clarke discusses what he views as both similarities and differences between the writing styles of Carver and Hemingway in "Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence":

Although Hemingway remains 'one of many' who have had an effect on Carver's work, there is often a sense of similarity between them: the spareness, the flat tones, even the subject-matter seem to establish a distinct ambience between two fictional worlds. And yet there is a qualitative difference which, once again, establishes the particular terms on which Carver empties and opens up the contingencies of American myth, so he exposes the extent to which the Hemingway code is dependent upon it. As such Carver moves between the two: a mythic past gauged against a banal and yet menacing present, reinvesting meaning in a Hemingway style now devoid of its myth-making prerogatives. Hemingway's codes of identity become little more than projections of fantasy and popular

² In 1983, four years before stating in the McCaffery/Gregory interview that "Hemingway was certainly an influence" (75), Carver made what would later prove to be a contradictory remark concerning whether or not he was "influenced" by Hemingway: "Influences are forces—circumstances, personalities, irresistible as the tide. I can't talk about books or writers who might have influenced me. That kind of influence, literary influence, is hard for me to pin down with any kind of certainty. It would be as inaccurate for me to say I don't think I've been influenced by any writers. For instance, I've long been a fan of Ernest Hemingway's novels and short stories On occasion it's been said that my writing is "like" Hemingway's writing. But I can't say his writing influenced mine" (*Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* 19).

myth which hide the cultural *nada* beneath. Hemingway sanitized.
(108).

As Clarke suggests, Carver's fictional world is often more "menacing" than Hemingway's fictional world. In his essay "On Writing," Carver discusses the necessary role that tension and menace play in his stories by examining how the minimalist technique of omission is often used to heighten suspense:

There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion, or else, most often, there simply won't be a story. What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things. (17)

Few readers would argue with Carver's claim that a sense of tension or suspense must be present for a story to exist. However, Carver's definition of how tension is created in a story differs somewhat from traditional definitions. In his minimalist stories, Carver certainly uses traditional methods for creating tension, such as the element of surprise, time constraints which force characters to act quickly, and even "cut" scenes which momentarily take the focus off of the main action, only to return at an even more suspenseful moment. However, what differentiates Carver's method of creating tension from the traditional techniques used by most non-minimalist writers is how he regularly uses omission to heighten suspense. In "The Bath," for instance, Scotty's mother loses hope with

each passing day as her son lies in a comatose state after being struck by a car. The doctor continues to reassure Scotty's mother that her son will eventually "wake up," but "pictures," "blood tests" and "brain scans" continually reaffirm the serious nature of Scotty's condition. Like Scotty's mother, readers have reason to believe that the boy could die at any moment. After spending a number of sleepless nights at the hospital, Scotty's mother goes home to take a bath and gain some much needed rest. It is during this tense, final moment that the telephone rings. The following conversation concludes the story:

"Yes!" she said. "Hello!" she said.

"Mrs. Weiss," a man's voice said.

"Yes," she said. "This is Mrs. Weiss. Is it about Scotty?" she said.

"Scotty," the voice said. "It is about Scotty," the voice said.

"It has to do with Scotty, yes." (56)

Because the baker calls and speaks with Scotty's father earlier in the story, it is likely that the mysterious caller is none other than the baker, calling yet again to discuss how he must receive payment for his work on Scotty's birthday cake. Scotty's mother, however, fears that the man might be someone from the hospital, calling to inform her that Scotty has died. Considering Scotty's dire condition, the boy's birthday cake, which is now days old and was never even picked up, couldn't be further from the mother's mind. By omitting important details such as the identity of the caller and the reason for the call, Carver ends

the story on a menacing note as he leaves the mother both literally and figuratively “holding the phone,” terrified that her son might be dead.³

Carver believed that all great writers of experimental fiction must discover their own “voice” prior to mastering a particular style of writing. Carver writes:

It’s akin to style, what I’m talking about, but it isn’t style alone. It is the writer’s particular and unmistakable signature on everything he writes. It is his world and no other. This is one of the things that distinguishes one writer from another. Not talent. There’s plenty of that around. But a writer who has some special way of looking at things and who gives artistic expression to that way of looking: that writer may be around for a time It should be noted that real experiment in fiction is original, hard-earned and cause for rejoicing. But someone else’s way of looking at things—Barthelme’s, for instance—should not be chased after by other writers. It won’t work. There is only one Barthelme, and for another writer to try to appropriate Barthelme’s particular sensibility

³ Carver enjoyed revising his works and would often publish alternate versions of his stories. An example is found in “A Small, Good Thing” (1983), which was published just two years after “The Bath.” In “A Small, Good Thing,” Carver adds additional details, including character names and a different, much less ambiguous conclusion. Where “The Bath” abruptly ends with a suspenseful phone call, in “A Small, Good Thing,” Scotty’s parents visit the baker and are somewhat comforted by food and conversation. Carver states the following with regards to the two stories: “Certainly there’s a lot more optimism in ‘A Small, Good Thing.’ In my own mind I consider them to be really two entirely different stories, not just different versions of the same story; it’s hard to even look on them as coming from the same source. I went back to that one [“The Bath”], as well as several others, because I felt there was unfinished business that needed attending to. The story hadn’t been told originally, it had been messed around with, condensed and compressed in “The Bath” to highlight the qualities of menace that I wanted to emphasize—you see this with the business about the baker, the phone call, with its menacing voice on the other line, the bath, and so on. But I still felt there was unfinished business, so in the midst of writing these other stories for *Cathedral* I went back to “The Bath” and tried to see what aspects of it needed to be enhanced, re-drawn, re-imagined” (McCaffery and Gregory 66).

or *mise en scene* under the rubric of innovation is for that writer to mess around with chaos and disaster and, worse, self-deception.

(*Fires* 13, 15)

The fictional world depicted by Carver in many of his minimalist stories is bleak, but Carver's world is not entirely hopeless. Carver's early works are populated with alcoholics, divorcees, the unemployed and similar characters struggling to cope with the challenges of life. The characters often appear to have much to say, but they either choose not to speak, or stumble in their attempts to communicate. Many of Carver's stories take place indoors, usually in kitchens or living rooms where telephones, radios and television sets play important roles. One of Carver's trademarks and a distinctive "signature" of his minimalist style is the way in which he includes ordinary language and seemingly non-important items in his stories to heighten meaning and create a sense of realism. According to Carver, "It's possible, in a poem or short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power. It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader's spine" (*Fires* 15). In his minimalist works, Carver allows items such as ringing phones, broken dishes, and dirty ashtrays to "tell" the story, and regularly excludes exposition and other forms of narratorial commentary. In "Why Don't You Dance?," the opening story in Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* collection, the narrator relates the strange events of a single day

involving drinking and an awkward dance which takes place during what appears to be an impromptu garage sale. Early in the story, the narrator mentions a lengthy list of household items which are removed from a house, then reassembled and reconnected in the front yard:

The chiffonier stood a few feet from the foot of the bed. He had emptied the drawers into cartons that morning, and the cartons were in the living room. A portable heater was next to the chiffonier. A rattan chair with a decorator pillow stood at the foot of the bed. The buffed aluminum kitchen set took up a part of the driveway. A yellow muslin cloth, much too large, a gift, covered the table and hung down over the sides. A potted fern was on the table, along with a box of silverware and a record player, also gifts. A big console-model television set rested on a coffee table, and a few feet away from this stood a sofa and chair and a floor lamp. The desk was pushed against the garage door. A few utensils were on the desk, along with a wall clock and two framed prints. There was also in the driveway a carton with cups, glasses, and plates, each object wrapped in newspaper. That morning he had cleared out the closets, and except for the three cartons in the living room, all the stuff was out of the house. He had run an extension cord on out there and everything was connected. Things worked, no different from how it was when they were inside. (3-4)

The man's irrational act can be attributed at least in part to the alcohol he consumes throughout the story, but the narrator never explicitly reveals the man's reasons for removing "all the stuff" from the house. Clues are given throughout the story, however, suggesting that a female companion who once lived with the man has severed the relationship for some reason. Because the "yellow muslin cloth," a "box of silverware" and a "record player" are labeled as "gifts," it is possible that the two were once married and received the "gifts" as wedding presents. The narrator ends the episode stating that the protagonist uses an extension cord to "connect everything," making "things" work "no different from how it was when they were inside" (4). The man's decision to remove the furniture from the house, only to "[re]connect everything" outside, can be viewed as a literal expression by the man to "clean out" not only the "closet," but the entire house. One can argue that the man expresses his desire to make a fresh start and leave the past behind by physically removing all material possessions from the house. This interpretation also explains why the man has no problem selling his items to the young couple at such a discounted price. At the same time, however, the narrator's statement that "things worked, no different from how it was when they were inside" is problematic, as the words "things" and "it" are vague terms used by Carver to allow for multiple interpretations. The word "things" certainly refers to the lengthy list of material possessions that have been removed from the house and reconnected in the front yard with an extension cord; this reading supports the narrator's claim that "things," including the "television set," "record player," a "portable heater" and a

“table lamp,” all work, “no different from how it was when they were inside.” However, the terms “things” and “it” might also relate to the relationship in general, as the physical items described throughout the passage can be seen as representative of the past life and memories once shared between the man and woman. This interpretation challenges the narrator’s reliability, as the woman is noticeably missing from the scene. The protagonist, who on an emotional level appears to be little more than a broken alcoholic, is physically capable of moving and reconnecting the furniture, but the once strong connection between him and the woman is now lost and likely irreparable. In contrast to the narrator’s claim that nothing had changed, when one considers the current relationship of the protagonist and his “wife,” it is evident that “things” are much “different” than they once were; in reality, everything has changed.

A Minimalist Version of the Unreliable Narrator in “So Much Water So Close To Home” and “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”

In two of his best known minimalist works, “So Much Water So Close To Home” and “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” Carver employs an ambiguous narrative style reminiscent of the style used throughout “The Bath.” In “Reconsidering Raymond Carver’s ‘Development’: The Revisions of ‘So Much Water So Close To Home,’” Günter Leypoldt examines how Carver uses a “minimalist version” of the unreliable narrator in the story “So Much Water So Close To Home” and challenges the notion posed by critics such as Adam Meyer

and William Stull that Carver's writing "evolved" during his career.⁴ Leypoldt writes, "The story's minimalist signature consists in the fact that its ambiguity is more subtle than that of more conventional experimental fiction, as the narrator's unreliability is never established with certainty" (331). In the story, Stuart and a group of friends find the naked body of a young woman in a river on the first evening of a three-day fishing trip. After ensuring that the girl "wasn't going anywhere" by tying a nylon cord around the woman's wrist and securing the body to a tree, the men continue with the trip as planned (215). Days later, the men break camp and finally report the probable rape and murder to the police. It is at this point that Claire, Stuart's wife and the primary character of the story, learns about the dead woman. Claire is understandably shocked by the apathetic manner in which her husband chooses to deal with the events involving the dead girl, but throughout the story, Claire's words and actions suggest that her mental struggle involves much more than just a temporary case of confusion regarding the grisly find. According to Leypoldt:

Claire fails to understand the reasons for her feeling of victimization, and so the reader is left to conjecture that her horror might result from her husband's lack of empathy. However, Carver pulls the rug out from under this thesis with a device typical of minimalist fiction: he destabilizes the story's causal network, not by literal commentary, but by blurring Claire's narration with a note of

⁴ For more on the argument that Carver "evolved" as a writer throughout his career, see Adam Meyer's article, "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism."

unreliability. The result is not, of course, the easily recognizable kind of psychotic narration one knows from, say, Beckett or Faulkner, which leads to an immediate breakdown of credibility. Rather, Carver's minimalist version of the unreliable narrator achieves its destabilizing effects precisely because its unreliability cannot be relied upon. By offering merely faint intimations that there may be a slightly neurotic or compulsive element involved, an occasional blurring of perspective, the text does not ironize the speaker completely but merely puts the story's voice in invisible quotation marks, intimating that parts of the narration may be flawed without, however, stating exactly which ones. (326)

Important clues, what Leypoldt terms as "faint intimations," are given throughout the story suggesting that Claire can be viewed as an unreliable narrator who exhibits both compulsive and neurotic behaviors. For instance, after arguing with Stuart about why he did not immediately report the probable murder, Claire breaks a load of dishes in an apparent attempt to "move" Stuart into continuing the conversation:

I close my eyes and hold on to the sink. Then I rake my arm across the drainboard and send the dishes to the floor.

He doesn't move. I know he's heard. He lifts his head as if still listening. But he doesn't move otherwise. He doesn't turn around. (80)

Claire may have successfully “moved” Stuart to consider her words by walking away and leaving him to clean up the mess, but in what appears to be no more than just a matter of minutes, she “sweep[s] up the broken dishes,” then goes outside and asks Stuart if they could “go for a drive?” (83). Stuart responds to Claire’s question as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, then touches her on the hip and states that they could “pick up some beer” (83). This episode is presented from Claire’s point of view, and suggests, at least through Claire’s perspective, that Stuart is an unsympathetic character who doesn’t listen. At the same time, however, because Claire quickly cleans up the mess and immediately joins Stuart outside, Stuart’s decision to not immediately respond to his wife’s extreme act seems to suggest that he has witnessed Claire react in similar ways on other occasions. For this reason, he chooses to simply ignore what he considers to be nothing more than a compulsive act. The argument can also be made that Claire acts compulsively when choosing to sleep on the sofa, attending the funeral of the girl, and worrying about trivial things such as whether “backyard” should be spelled as one or two words when written in a note to her young son (85).

Claire’s neurotic thoughts are related in a cursory and ambiguous nature throughout the story, further supporting the argument that her character is unreliable. In actuality, Claire is a third-party witness to a probable rape and murder who is initially bothered by both her husband’s slow response in reporting the crime, and the fact that he chooses to emotionally distance himself from the events surrounding the discovery. However, with each passing moment, Claire

becomes more and more consumed with the girl's death, to the point that in her own mind she takes the girl's place in the water: "I look at the creek. I'm right in it, eyes open, face down, staring at the moss on the bottom, dead" (83). Claire's vision of seeing herself dead in the water precedes the scene which can be viewed as her own symbolic rape.⁵ Preparatory to the actual "rape" scene, a climatic event occurs on the journey to the funeral which again brings Claire's reliability into question. After following Claire for a number of miles on a desolate road, a "crewcut man" eventually "passes" and "waves" at Claire (86). When he notices that the car is no longer behind him, he turns around and begins to search for Claire:

I slow down and find a place. I pull over and shut off the motor. I can hear the river down below the trees. Then I hear the pickup coming back.

I lock the doors and roll up the windows.

"You all right?" the man says. He raps on the glass. "You okay?" He leans his arms on the door and brings his face to the window.

I stare at him. I can't think what else to do.

"Is everything all right in there? How come you're all locked up?"

I shake my head.

⁵ Günter Leypoldt further discusses the ambiguous nature of this scene, and minimalism in general in "Reconsidering Raymond Carver's 'Development': The Revisions of 'So Much Water so Close to Home'").

“Roll down your window.” He shakes his head and looks at the highway and then back at me. “Roll it down now.”

“Please,” I say, “I have to go.” (86)

Throughout this episode, Claire’s actions are driven by fear which stems from the fact that she can’t get the girl’s rape and murder out of her mind. The concise but orderly manner in which Claire narrates the first five lines both builds suspense and reveals her increasing paranoia. Claire begins the episode stating that she slows, stops, and then “hear[s] the river down below the trees.” Claire never explicitly states that the sound of the water reminds her that the dead woman was also found in the Naches river, but her ensuing actions strongly support this claim. Immediately after hearing the river, Claire “hear[s] the pickup coming back,” which causes her to “lock the doors and roll up the windows.” Claire’s actions to this point are justified, considering that she is travelling alone, and the body of the young woman was found in close proximity to her current location. However, little in the actual dialogue between the characters supports Claire’s fear that the man is a sexual predator. At first glance, the man’s statement, “Roll it [the window] down now” may appear harsh, but considering that the man’s repeated attempts to communicate in a polite manner results in nothing but a blank stare and a shake of the head, this direct approach is merited. In response to the man’s command, Claire finally speaks for the first and last time: “Please . . . I have to go” (86). Claire’s vague response reveals to the man that she can actually talk, but her statement fails to explain why she chooses to sit in her car with the doors locked and the windows rolled up. The

episode between Claire and the man concludes with the man offering a final attempt to “help:”

“Open the door,” he says as if he isn’t listening. “You’re going to choke in there.”

He looks at my breasts, my legs. I can tell that’s what he’s doing.

“Hey, sugar,” he says. “I’m just here to help is all.” (86)

Claire’s knowledge of the frightening events surrounding the woman’s death, mixed with the fact that she is alone and vulnerable, cause Claire to question the man’s intentions. For these reasons, when the man uses the word “choke” to describe what might happen to Claire if she continues to sit in a parked car with the windows rolled up during the heat of the day, Claire instantly recalls the events of the murder, tells herself that the man is looking at her body in a sexual manner, and fears that the man intends to rape, “choke” and ultimately kill her. Because Claire makes it to the funeral without incident and the man is never again mentioned in the story, readers can assume that the man actually is harmless and genuinely concerned about Claire’s well-being. This interpretation challenges Claire’s reliability as readers are left to decide whether Claire is really in danger, or simply experiencing a moment of temporary paranoia.

The ambiguous final section of “So Much Water So Close To Home,” which details the “symbolic rape” of Claire (336), brings Claire’s reliability into question more than any other section of the story. The episode begins with Claire worrying, “for a crazy instant” (87), that she doesn’t know the whereabouts

of her son, Dean. Stuart tells Claire that Dean is “outside,” then attempts to make love to her. The story concludes:

He drains his glass and stands up. He says, “I think I know what you need.”

He reaches his 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.

“That’s right,” I say, finishing the buttons myself. “Before Dean comes. Hurry.” (87-88)

This concluding episode parallels the scene involving the “crewcut” motorist as Claire again states just moments before the sexual encounter between her and her husband that she “can’t hear a thing with so much water going” (88). This sentence once again reinforces that her thoughts continue to be consumed by the horrible events surrounding the death of the woman. Furthermore, the sentence also forces readers to question why she would simply give in to Stuart’s sexual advances at the end of the story because she chooses to physically avoid Stuart in all prior instances; first by “lying on the far side of the bed away from his hairy legs” (84) and ultimately by choosing to “make [her] bed on the sofa” (85). As Leypoldt notes:

It is not by accident . . . that Carver chose to omit from the text any description of Claire's attitude on the brink of her symbolic rape—such as her tone of voice, her posture, her facial expression. By remaining silent about Claire's feelings, he has opened up the story's ending to overtones of sexual desire, resonating with Claire's encouraging gestures (as she helps Stuart to open her blouse and says to him, 'That's right,' 'Hurry'). Consequently, alongside the notion that Claire's encouragements may be motivated by her eagerness to 'get it over with' as quickly and painlessly as possible—what to her is at best a 'loveless and hurried act of sex' (Shute 8) and at worst a miserable ordeal—there emerges another possible reading, which interprets her active participation as being driven by a genuine sexual arousal in the face of being pressed into surrender and self-abandonment. (336)

By omitting certain information and positioning Claire as an unreliable narrator whose thoughts and actions reveal more questions than answers, Carver leaves readers to decide Claire's ultimate fate.

Most of the stories in Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* collection were written in the mid to late 70s during a period in which Carver was losing the battle to overcome his addiction to alcohol. Because Carver preferred to write about "the things I saw in lives I witnessed being lived around me, and in the life I myself lived" (McCaffery and Gregory 77), it is not surprising that of the seventeen stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*,

fourteen relate to, or at least mention, alcohol or drinking. As discussed earlier, in “Why Don’t You Dance?” the man’s irrational behavior, which includes moving all his possessions into the driveway and encouraging the young couple to dance, can be attributed at least in part to the whiskey he consumes throughout the story. In “Gazebo,” a story about Duane and Holly’s battle to cope with Duane’s affair, the narrator ties alcohol to Holly’s suicide attempt in the opening sentences: “That morning she pours Teacher’s over my belly and licks it off. That afternoon she tries to jump out the window” (21). Later in the story, Duane reveals that alcohol has always played a role in the couple’s decision-making process: “Drinking’s funny. When I look back on it, all of our important decisions have been figured out when we were drinking” (25). In the opening lines of “One More Thing,” Maxine returns from work to find her husband “drunk again,” verbally abusing their fifteen-year-old daughter (155). Few readers would argue with the statement that alcohol negatively affects the thoughts and actions of these and other characters found in the stories in which drinking is mentioned. However, in “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” alcohol plays a primary role in the story as the ideas expressed by the characters become more ambiguous and unreliable with each drink.

As the title suggests, the story revolves around a discussion concerning love; specifically, about the different ways that love can be defined. The story takes place in a kitchen, where two couples sit around a table drinking gin. Nick is the primary narrator, but his friend Mel leads the discussion. Nick reveals in the opening lines that Mel is a cardiologist and states that “sometimes that gives

him the right” to talk (137). In contrast to most Carver characters that are generally undereducated and down on their luck, Mel is educated and successful. Mel’s occupation as a heart surgeon proves that he understands and makes a living by repairing the human heart, but this does not necessarily mean that he is qualified to speak on matters of love. Similarly, and as Nick suggests by using the term “sometimes,” Mel’s education and success might qualify him to speak about certain issues, but Mel’s occupation alone does not necessarily qualify him to speak on all matters, which would include the matter of love. As the story continues, readers learn that Mel studied religion for five years prior to attending medical school, has been divorced and remarried, and is the father of at least two children. Depending on the reader’s perspective, particularly when one considers that divorce is commonly the end result of a failed marriage, these additional details regarding Mel’s life may or may not give Mel “the right” to talk about love.

Mel discusses many different types of love in the story including spiritual love, physical love, carnal love and sentimental love. Mel makes strong arguments for, and even provides examples of, these different forms of love, yet in each instance, his words are preceded by a drink of gin. Nick introduces readers to the first type of love examined in the story, defined as “spiritual love,” in the following passage: “There was an ice bucket on the table. The gin and the tonic water kept going around, and we somehow got on the subject of love. Mel thought real love was nothing less than spiritual love” (137). After arguing with his wife Terry that “real” love doesn’t involve stalking, attempted murder or

suicide, Mel finishes his drink, “reach[es] for the gin bottle,” then states, “I just wouldn’t call Ed’s behavior love. That’s all I’m saying honey What about you guys? Does that sound like love to you?” (138-139). Although Mel asks Nick and Laura the question concerning whether or not Ed’s violent actions should be viewed as “love,” by using the second person “you” in place of their actual names, Carver hints to readers that they too should consider whether or not Ed’s actions represent a valid form of love. Later in the story, Carver again uses the word “you” to invite both the characters in the story as well as readers to consider Mel’s thoughts on love: “‘I’ll tell you what real love is,’ Mel said. ‘I mean, I’ll give you a good example. And then you can draw your own conclusions.’ He poured more gin into his glass. He added an ice cube and a sliver of lime. We waited and sipped our drinks” (144). Mel proceeds to ask a number of compelling questions concerning past memories and the different stages of love that a person might experience during a lifetime, including marriage and divorce and how a person might love someone “more than life itself” yet grow to “hate [their] guts” (144). Because his words are prefaced by a drink, however, certain readers might consider his argument to be little more than the ramblings of a man who is becoming increasingly drunk. Mel’s credibility as a narrator is further challenged at the end of the episode when he questions his own validity with respect to love: “‘Am I wrong? Am I way off base? Because I want you to set me straight if you think I’m wrong. I want to know. I mean, I don’t know anything, and I’m the first one to admit it’” (145). Although Mel’s argument concerning love and marriage is supported by the fact that all four characters have been divorced

and remarried, by admitting that he might be wrong, the focus instantly shifts from his potentially enlightening argument regarding love to the question of whether or not he is drunk: “‘Mel, for God’s sake,’ Terry said. She reached out and took hold of his wrist. ‘Are you getting drunk? Honey? Are you drunk?’” (145). Towards the end of the story, Nick responds to Mel’s question concerning whether or not they understood what the story of the old man and woman seriously injured in a car crash suggests about love by admitting to readers that “‘Maybe we were a little drunk by then. I know it was hard keeping things in focus’” (152). Considering that alcohol and drinking is mentioned throughout the story, readers are aware that the characters are more than just “a little drunk” by this point; the alcohol consumed throughout the story prohibits the characters from understanding and successfully defining love. This fact not only invites readers to challenge the reliability of the narration, but it leaves readers with the difficult, yet potentially rewarding task of making sense of a seemingly disjointed story.

Silence as a Form of Communication in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*

Carver argues in an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory that it is the writer’s responsibility to relate his/her story in a way which allows readers opportunities to “communicate” with the author. He outlines what he terms the “compact between writer and reader” when stating:

I guess I'm old fashioned enough to feel that the reader must somehow be involved at the human level. And that there is still, or ought to be, a compact between writer and reader. Writing, or any form of artistic endeavor, is not just expression, it's communication. When a writer stops being truly interested in communicating something and is only aiming at expressing something, and that not very well—well, they can express themselves by going out to the street corner and hollering. A short story or a novel or a poem should deliver a certain number of emotional punches. And you can judge that work by how strong these punches are and how many are thrown. . . . The writer's job, if he or she has a job, is not to provide conclusions or answers. If the story answers *itself*, its problems and conflicts, and meets its *own* requirements, then that's enough. On the other hand, I want to make certain my readers aren't left feeling cheated in one way or another when they've finished my stories. It's important for writers to provide enough to satisfy readers, even if they don't provide "the" answers, or clear resolutions. ("An Interview with Raymond Carver" 76-77)

In many of the stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Carver attempts to "communicate" and create a "compact between writer and reader" by silencing the characters during important and climactic moments. In "Sacks," for instance, the narrator states that his primary intent is to "pass along" important information regarding his father's affair (37), but in actuality, readers learn most

about the father and his affair during the moments in which the characters remain silent. The story takes place in an airport bar, where a father hurriedly reveals to his son Les many details concerning his affair while waiting for a plane to arrive. Because Les speaks sparingly and purports to know only what his father tells him about the affair (44), readers must rely heavily on the father's words in an attempt to understand why the father feels the need to share the details of the affair. The father tells Les that "the most important thing involved here" (44) relates to the moment in which the affair was discovered by the woman's husband, which results in his attempt to escape by crashing through the couple's picture window. Because the father claims that this climactic event marks the "most important thing" with respect to the affair, Les presses his father for additional details: "You got away? He didn't come after you? She still in Redding, that woman?" (45). Instead of answering these important questions, the father looks at Les as if he were crazy (45), then responds with a question of his own, "You don't know anything, do you?" (45). Perhaps remembering that Les knows only what he tells him about the affair, the father first apologizes for attacking his son, then partially answers his questions:

"Ah, God, I'm sorry," he said. "The man went all to pieces, is what. He got down on the floor and cried. She stayed out in the kitchen. She did all her crying out there. She got down on her knees and she prayed to God, good and loud so the man would hear."

My father started to say something more. But instead he shook his head. Maybe he wanted me to say something. (45)

The father begins by telling Les that “the man went all to pieces,” but because both he and his wife cry shortly following the failed affair, it is clear that they are both distraught. Less telling, however, is the father’s statement that the wife prays “good and loud so the man would hear.” Although it is possible that the wife loves her husband and prays “so the man would hear” in an attempt to express her heartfelt sorrow to him, it is also possible, especially when one considers that the father never reveals to Les whether or not the woman still lives in Redding, that the woman prays aloud because she fears what her husband might do to her. Because the father “starts to say more” but chooses instead to “[shake] his head,” it is clear that the father knows the end result of the affair, which, at least from his perspective, is not pleasant. By choosing to omit certain details and silence the father during pivotal moments, Carver opens the story to multiple interpretations, allowing readers to decide not only the fate of the woman, but the fate of the relationship between the father and son.

Silence is also used to reveal additional meaning in “One More Thing,” the highly ambiguous final story in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. The story begins with Maxine returning from work to find L.D. arguing with their daughter Rae over what appears to be a debilitating illness. According to Rae, the illness, which is never specifically revealed, is “all in his [her father’s] head” (156). After listening to the two argue for a few moments, Maxine sides with their daughter and tells L.D. to leave the house. Although the narrator states that L.D.

is drunk, and Rae claims that he is suffering from some sort of mental illness, readers are told nothing about L.D.'s past actions and can only speculate as to what L.D. might have done to warrant Maxine's throwing him out of the house. As L.D. is preparing to leave, he hears Maxine and Rae "in the living room talking in their low voices" (158). The conversation appears to relate to L.D., but because the women talk in "low voices," the actual content of the conversation is never revealed, leaving both L.D. and readers to question what the characters might be saying. In the final episode of the story, L.D. struggles to find the right words to express his feelings to his wife and daughter: "I don't know what else to say except I guess I'll never see you again. . . . I'm going, that's all I can say" (159). Although L.D.'s words suggest that he cares about his family and has more to say, Carver silences the protagonist in order to invite readers to interpret L.D.'s words and actions in whatever way they choose, opening the story to a number of "satisfying" conclusions. Considering that Carver uses silence as a minimalist technique to create multiple meanings throughout *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, it is fitting that Carver ends the final story of the collection by again silencing the protagonist:

He [L.D.] said, "I just want to say one more thing."

But then he could not think what it could possibly be. (159)

CHAPTER IV

AMY HEMPEL: A CONTEMPORARY MASTER OF MINIMALIST FICTION

American Amy Hempel is a contemporary author known primarily as a minimalist short story writer. A large majority of Hempel's stories are narrated in the first person, and they generally include just one or two female characters struggling to cope with the emotional pain caused by some unstated event which occurs prior to the beginning of the story. Ironically, Hempel's stories are regularly praised by book reviewers and fellow writers, yet relatively few scholars have analyzed her stories in detail.¹ In 1999, Cynthia Whitney Hallett published a book examining the technique of minimalism titled, *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. As the title suggests, Hallett's book addresses both minimalism and short stories written by three noteworthy minimalist authors. Hallett's book provides an inclusive study on Hempel's early collections, giving a brief yet helpful explication on all thirty-one stories found in *Reasons to Live* and *At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom*, but the book does not address Hempel's latest stories published in *Tumble Home* and *The Dog of the Marriage*. I agree with Hallett and others that Hempel's first composition, "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried" is in many ways her best written story,² and with Chuck Palahnuik that "The Harvest" is perhaps Hempel's premier work of minimalist fiction,³ but because what little has been

¹ For a particularly positive review of Hempel's latest collection "The Dog of the Marriage," see Patrick Ness' "Choreography for Canines."

² (See *Minimalism and the Short Story* 92).

³ (Palahnuik discusses the minimalist characteristics of "The Harvest" in his article, "She Breaks Your Heart").

written on Hempel generally focuses on one or both of these stories, which unfortunately for many are the only Hempel stories that will ever be read, in this chapter I focus primarily on Hempel's "newer" and lesser known minimalist works in an attempt to fill the void of what I consider to be an underrepresentation of critical analysis respecting the works of one of the greatest living minimalist authors.

Great works of literature generally demand a certain level of participation from readers. This is especially true of "minimalist" literature, as minimalist writers consciously omit or withhold information, inviting readers to draw on their own past experiences and knowledge to find meaning in the text. According to Hempel:

There's a way in which a writer does not have to spell things out, and the reader will get it. There's a way in which the mind works to impose meaning and order automatically on seemingly random bits of information, so you can almost offer these bits up without knowing yourself how they fit together—suspecting that they do—and trust the reader to make some sense out of it. (Sapp 88)

The act of reading a minimalist story can be compared to the process one must take to solve a difficult mathematical equation. As Hempel notes, readers of minimalist fiction are presented with "seemingly random bits of information," then asked to fit the pieces together and "make some sense out of it." Unlike mathematical equations, however, which generally allow for just a single correct answer, Hempel's style of writing invites and trusts readers to "impose meaning"

on the story and ultimately “get it [the story]” in whichever way/s makes sense to the individual reader. Although Hempel’s style of writing places a great deal of trust in readers, the majority of her stories are complex as the primary meaning is often found just below the surface.

Hempel’s commonly anthologized story “The Harvest” can be classified as a work of metafiction.⁴ In the story, Hempel constructs a tale about a woman’s traumatic car wreck and ensuing recovery, only to deconstruct the story, revealing to readers the “true,” but unbelievable facts surrounding the accident. In “What Were The White Things?” a story in Hempel’s latest collection, *Dog of the Marriage*, Hempel again uses a metafictional framework to tell the story, but she does so in order to highlight the role that minimalist techniques play in her works.

Metafiction and Minimalist Techniques in “What Were the White Things?”

“What Were The White Things?” showcases Hempel’s talent of telling highly complex stories in a compressed space; the work consists of just 656 words. The story, narrated in first person by a nameless, female protagonist who stops to attend a lecture about crockery and paintings on her way to the radiologist’s office, begins:

⁴ Hallet writes, “Since in the original form ‘. . . to Q,’ Hempel discussed how she came to write the story and certain interesting parts of her process, the infusion of this epilogue into the original fiction creates her only story that is both metafiction and minimalism—metafiction, because the narrator addresses the process of writing fiction; and to a lesser degree minimalism, because her discourse addresses aspects that comprise basic elements of the minimalist style, although the “m”-word is never used” (86). I argue in this chapter that Hempel also uses a metafictional framework to highlight her minimalist style of writing in “What Were The White Things?”

These pieces of crockery are a repertory company, playing roles in each dream. No, that's not the way it started. He said the pieces of crockery played roles in each *painting*. The artist clicked through slides of still lifes he had painted over thirty years. Someone in the small, attentive audience said, "Isn't that the cup in the painting from years ago?" Yes, it was, the artist said, and the pitcher and mixing bowl and goblet, too. Who was the nude woman leaning against the table on which the crockery was displayed? The artist didn't say, and no one in the small, attentive audience asked. (343)

This introductory paragraph can be interpreted in different ways, perhaps leaving readers with more questions than answers. It is clear that the narrator and others in the "small, attentive audience" are looking at crockery, but the bluntness of the narration, mixed with the fact that the artist is showing "slides of still lifes," in which a nude woman would certainly be out of the ordinary, makes it difficult for readers to know if the crockery is actually sitting on a table somewhere in the room, or if the audience is simply seeing pictures of the crockery in the slideshow. The second sentence, "He said the pieces of crockery played roles in each *painting*" seems to suggest that the completed paintings are of utmost importance to the artist, while the crockery plays a secondary role in the overall composition displayed on the canvas. However, this statement fails to reveal if the crockery is literally placed in the room on a table. Because the artist is respected and considered highly "gifted" (343), it would seem likely that he would want his presentation to be as professional as possible; therefore, it would make

sense to physically display the crockery. The artist answers the man's question, "Isn't that the cup in the painting from years ago?" in the affirmative, and adds that "the pitcher," "mixing bowl" and "goblet" were also in the painting. Perhaps the most interesting question stems from the fact that a nude woman leans against the table, especially if readers choose to physically place the woman in the room. The question is never asked by the "attentive" audience nor addressed by the artist, however, signaling the first of many omissions around which the story revolves.

In the second paragraph, the narrator continues to deliver bits of information regarding the artist, then reveals to readers that she (the first-person narrator) is suffering from a potentially serious illness that has yet to be fully diagnosed. It is at this point that the narrator begins to tie the questions raised during the art exhibit directly to the primary theme of the story; the woman is struggling to understand and cope with the fact that she might be dying. The narration continues:

I arrived at the lecture on my way to someplace else, an appointment with a doctor my doctor had arranged. Two days before, she was telling me his name and address and I have to say, I stopped listening, even though—or because—it was important. So instead of going to the radiologist's office, I walked into a nondenominational church where the artist's presentation was advertised on a plaque outside: "Finding the Mystery in Clarity."

Was this not the opposite of what most people sought? I thought, I will learn something! (343)

In this episode, the woman attempts to momentarily delay the inevitable by attending a lecture instead of going directly to the doctor's office. She "stop[s] listening" to the doctor "even though—or because" she knows that he has "important" information to tell her (343). The fact that the woman enters a "nondenominational church" to hear the lecture might suggest that she is in need of, or perhaps even seeking help from a higher power. The paragraph concludes with the woman questioning the wording of the plaque advertising the lecture, and her emphatic yet vague statement, "I will learn something!" (343). True of many of the woman's statements, readers are left to decide if the declaration applies to just the art show, or perhaps also to the bigger and more serious issue concerning the woman's illness. This brief surface reading of the paragraph provides ample information for readers to understand what is happening in the story, but applying a metafictional reading to the text provides additional meaning and helps readers to understand what Hempel is attempting to say through the use of minimalist techniques in her stories.

Hempel often includes strange, even humorous statements to offset the serious themes addressed in her stories.⁵ Because the woman appears either to have cancer or some other form of life-threatening illness, few readers would classify "What Were the White Things?" as a "funny" story. The woman's decision to ignore the important yet difficult words of the doctor is somewhat

⁵ Hallett in *Minimalism and the Short Story*, Moody in his Introduction to *The Collection of Short Stories of Amy Hempel* and Palahnuik in "She Breaks your Heart" all address Hempel's tendency to use humor in her stories.

humorous, but when viewed from a metafictional standpoint, the argument can be made that Hempel includes this particular line not only to show that the woman fears what the doctor might say, but also to playfully address the claim that minimalist writers fail to tackle “important” issues in their works.⁶ Without question, white spots on a radiological film, like abortion in Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” or alcoholism in Carver’s “Why Don’t You Dance?” is a serious matter. True to the “rules” of minimalism, at this particular moment the woman chooses to ignore the problem, but readers are allowed into the woman’s mind and challenged to “learn something” by questioning how they might react if placed in a similar situation.

The narrator provides a clear example of metafiction as it pertains to minimalism when discussing the various ways that viewers might interpret the artist’s reasons for displaying the crockery as he does. First of all, it is important to note that the crockery itself is described in a manner supporting common definitions of minimalism: “The crockery was white, not glazed, and painted realistically” (343-344). Just as simple, yet direct language is used by minimalist writers to focus exclusively on the main idea of the story, the shadows and gaps

⁶ Robert Dunn writes, “Fiction has developed an insular priesthood, and its text is minimalism. But fictional minimalism is characterized by a narrowness, paucity, and opaqueness of vision. Too often characters are simply victimized by the world; they remain curiously somnolent and disengaged. At heart, minimalist fiction is a work of resignation to a world confusing, daunting, without apparent center. What minimalism doesn’t do is embrace grand, inexorable themes—of the heart, or pressing social questions: the familiar litany, nuclear matters, growing social inequity, a base, shameless political administration, the unreality and immorality of daily life—and examine them, not expecting solutions, but at the least enquiring into meaning and understanding. Meaning is not inherent in the world, it has to be mined and created. That is the job of art and literature. But true meaning lies deep, not on the surface. Minimal fiction most characteristically deals merely with surfaces” (54-55).

between the cups, bowls and pitchers prove to be more important to the viewers of the art exhibit than the actual pieces of crockery:

The pieces threw different lengths of shadows depending on the angle of the light in each painting. Sometimes the pieces were lined up touching one another, and other times there were gaps.

Were these gaps part of the mystery the artist had in mind? Did he mean for us to be literal, to think: absence? He said the mind wants to make sense of a thing, the mind wants to know what something stands for. (344)

In these lines, the narrator highlights some important questions commonly raised by minimalist art. Because Hempel is a writer, and because minimalist literature is the direct offspring of minimalist art, a definition of minimalism relating to both art and literature is indirectly presented in this passage. The questions posed by the narrator regarding “gaps” and “absence” relate to Hempel’s belief that in minimalism, “a lot of times what’s not reported in your work is more important than what actually appears on the page” (Sapp 82). Perhaps for this reason, the audience questions if they should interpret the artist’s work literally by focusing more on what isn’t directly included in the piece than on the actual pieces of crockery or even the nude woman standing next to the table. The final sentence spoken by the artist, “He said the mind wants to make sense of a thing, the mind wants to know what something stands for” (344), further substantiates Hempel’s beliefs concerning minimalism: “There’s a way in which the mind works to impose meaning and order automatically on seemingly random bits of information, so

you can almost offer these bits up without knowing yourself how they fit together” (Sapp, 88). In these lines, the invitation “to make sense” of the mystery created by the gaps is given both directly to viewers by the artist, and indirectly to readers by Hempel, the “artist” of the story. Immediately following this invitation, the lecture continues, providing the viewing audience, and most importantly, the readers of the story, additional insight into the mind of a minimalist artist:

Okay, the artist said, here is what I painted that September.

On the screen, we saw a familiar tabletop—familiar from years of his still lifes—and the two tallest pieces of crockery, the pitcher and the vase, were missing; nothing stood in their places.

Ahhhh, the small, attentive audience said.

Then someone asked the artist, What were the white things?

He meant what were the white things in the other paintings. What did they represent? And the artist said that was not a question he would answer. (344)

The audience’s response to the September version of the crockery painting presented on “a familiar tabletop” can be interpreted in two distinct ways.

Because the audience recognizes the “familiar” centerpiece of the painting, the argument can be made that most in the audience understand what the artist is suggesting when removing the two tallest pieces of crockery. In direct contrast to this argument, and because someone in the audience questions, “What were the white things,” it is also possible that the audience members are divided in their reactions to the paintings, or simply don’t understand the artist’s reason for

removing the pieces of crockery. From a metafictional standpoint, the “familiarity” of the tabletop, the absence represented by the missing crockery, and the artist’s decision to remain silent all apply to Hempel’s minimalist style of writing. Regardless of how readers choose to interpret the audience’s initial reaction to the painting, it is the artist’s decision to not answer the question concerning what the “white things” represent that matters most in this episode; this decision unites the subplot created in part by the audience’s reaction to the art exhibit to the primary question concerning the woman’s reaction to the diagnosis of her illness. The story concludes:

The doctor told me the meaning of what we looked at on the film. He asked me if I understood what he said. I said yes. I said yes, and that I wanted to ask one question: What were the white things?

The doctor said he would explain it to me again, and proceeded to tell me a second time. He asked me if this time I understood what he had told me. Yes, I said. I said, Yes, but what were the white things? (345)

In contrast to the episode detailing the artist’s decision to remain silent when asked about the “white things” created by the absence of the crockery, in the final scene, the doctor tells the woman on two separate occasions what the “white things” on the film represent. Although the woman claims to understand the doctor, because she continues to ask “What were the white things,” it is clear that she either doesn’t understand what the doctor says, or perhaps she is not yet

able to accept the doctor's grim diagnosis. Regardless of what the woman might be thinking when hearing the doctor's words, the exact diagnosis is never given and readers must decide how the questions concerning the various types of "white things" unite to create a complete story. Because "What Were the White Things?" is a challenging and highly ambiguous story, it will likely never be mentioned as one of Hempel's "best" works. Much like "The Harvest," however, "What Were the White Things?" is an important contribution to the study of Hempel's minimalist writing style and reaffirms the author's belief that the reader's response to a story is equal to, if not more important than the story itself.

Repetition and Ambiguity in "The Annex"

The structure of Hempel's "The Annex" is reminiscent of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"; information is repeated, but little is conclusively revealed. In the opening paragraphs of the story, a nameless, female narrator uses the pronoun "it" to methodically reveal that the death of a child weighs heavily on her mind. The story begins:

The headlights hit the headstone and I hate it all over again.

It is all that I can ever see, all that I can ever talk about. There is nothing else to talk about.

It is right there out in front. I mean the cemetery that is out over there across the street from our house. With the headlights turned off and the car parked outside the garage, there is enough of a moon to see that there is no missing it over there across the

street in the part of the cemetery the people around here call the annex.

The annex is for when the cemetery fills up.

Anyway, there is a stone there that has the baby's name on it. And there was a week-old bouquet of something all dried up past knowing what it was that was tied with wide white ribbon out there until the time I came home today. There was a white ribbon on it. I could have taken the ribbon away. But the woman would have come and put another one, I suppose. (223)

Throughout the story, but most notably in the opening paragraphs, the pronoun "it" is used to reveal certain details related to the death of a child, his/her recent burial, and the painful effects the death is having on both the mother and narrator. The opening line, "The headlights hit the headstone and I hate it all over again" suggests that someone has died, and though the narrator soon reveals that the deceased was a baby, the ambiguous "it" can be interpreted in a number of ways. Although the narrator's relationship to the baby is not revealed, the death of a young child is never hoped for, and rarely expected. Therefore, the term "it" as it applies to the premature passing of a child, which is symbolically revealed in the opening sentence through the mention of a "headstone," is something to be "hated." At the same time, the "it" in the opening sentence also refers to the "headlights" of the car driven by the mother of the dead baby. In the second sentence, "it" is again used, this time to reveal that the woman's words and thoughts are completely dominated by whatever "it" is that is

bothering her. In the fourth sentence, the narrator uses the pronoun “it” for the third time, stating that the cemetery is located directly in front of her house.

Although the narrator uses vague terminology throughout the opening paragraphs, because she repeatedly mentions the cemetery and the headlights of the car driven by the mother of the dead baby, one can infer that the narrator is bothered by both the death of the child and by the daily visits that the mother of the child makes to the cemetery. The reason/s for why the narrator is affected by the mother and baby to the extent that she cannot “see” or “talk” about anything else, however, is merely hinted at in the story.

True of most minimalist works, the title of Hempel’s “The Annex” is important and carefully chosen. The term annex, particularly when used as a verb, is roughly defined as a thing that is added or joined to the end of another thing that is often larger, or considered more important than the annexed part. The following list outlines some important items that are annexed in Hempel’s story in relation to this common definition:

- I. The wing of the cemetery is added to the original cemetery.
This is specifically labeled “the annex” by the narrator (223).
- II. The headstone with the baby’s name on it is added to the cemetery (223).
- III. A white ribbon and “week old bouquet” is added to the headstone (223).
- IV. Additional flowers are added to the grave (225).

Early in the story, the narrator reveals that a baby is buried in the part of the cemetery “the people around here call the annex” (223). She further explains that “the annex is for when the cemetery fills up,” (223) and reveals the difference between the original portion of the cemetery and the annex:

This is a cemetery which has its shapely tended trees and flowerful shrubs and Halloween headstones that go back two hundred years. The thing that is different about the annex is that the annex is not landscaped. It is a wild grown-over field of scrub oak and dune grass that gets bulldozed and plowed under as the need, in somebody’s mind, arises, one row at a time. (223-224).

Readers are given the first clue regarding the narrator’s feelings towards the child and mother when the narrator notes that the baby is buried in the annex, which is described as a “grown-over” extension of the original, well-kept portion of the cemetery. Much like the annex, the baby and mother are considered by the narrator to be of secondary importance; in fact, the narrator views the two as intruders, unwanted appendages that have entered into the narrator’s life without her blessing or permission. In contrast to the narrator’s feelings towards the child, the grieving mother deeply loved the baby. She visits the headstone on a daily basis, often bringing ribbons and flowers to adorn the grave. It is no surprise that the woman’s life has been devastated through the loss of her baby. What is surprising, however, is the narrator’s animosity towards the mother and child. Similar to many of Hempel’s minimalist stories, deciphering WHAT “The Annex” is about is not particularly a difficult task. However, what is challenging,

and vital to understanding what Hempel is attempting to suggest in this particular story, is discovering WHY the narrator feels the way she does towards the mother and child.

A lesser known, yet more important definition of the term “annex” as far as the story is concerned relates to the idea of obtaining, or taking personal possession of a thing, often without permission. The following list outlines the items that are annexed in Hempel’s story in accordance to this definition:

- I. The headstone
- II. “Junk” in the attic that “belonged to the previous owners.”
The narrator and her husband are in the process of clearing this “junk” out of the attic (224).
- III. A highchair is given to the grieving mother by the narrator’s husband (226).

The headstone added to the cemetery also fits the second definition of “annex” as it dominates the thoughts of both the narrator and the grieving mother. The narrator sees the headstone “from every window in the front” of her house, and it is all she can talk about (223-224). Because the narrator has never actually visited the gravesite, nor even read the depiction written on the headstone, the argument can be made that the headstone is the private property of the child’s mother. The narrator’s statement, “She’s there everyday—at the annex, that is” (226), supports this argument and is revealing on a number of levels. First of all, this statement alerts readers to the fact that the narrator is highly aware of the mother’s presence. Because the narrator uses the word “hate” in reference to

both the headstone and the headlights of the mother's car, and later "thank[s] God" that the woman doesn't "actually live around here" (225), there is no question that the narrator is bothered by the fact that the woman visits the cemetery on a daily basis. From the narrator's perspective, the woman has taken possession of the cemetery which happens to be located directly in front of her own home. The seemingly redundant phrase, "that is," which is tagged on to the statement revealing that the woman visits the annex every day can also be interpreted as the narrator's attempt to point out that at least during the moments when the narrator is "there everyday—at the annex," she cannot possibly be anywhere else. In these lines, it is clear that the narrator strongly dislikes and views the woman as an intruder, yet at this early stage of the story, few clues are given hinting at the possible reason/s WHY the narrator feels the way she does towards the mother.

In the second section of the story, the narrator provides readers with subtle clues suggesting a possible motive behind her hatred for the mother:

From every window in the front of our house, when you look out, that gravestone is what you see—from the sunporch, from the living room, from the dining room, from the bedroom upstairs, from the garage where my husband and I have been cleaning out the junk that belonged to the previous owners, which is why I cannot now find the shovel when I reach up to the place where it should be.

There is every other kind of tool hanging from nails pounded in. My husband is good at all the housey things that require these bucksaws and shingling hammers and extension ladders, the pitchfork and pruning shears, the lazy boy, the pick.

You see what it is? It is a two-car garage with a loft where we haven't had time yet to make the big effort to clean out the crap from the previous owners, why didn't they clean out their own crap, is what I want to know. The oversized stuffed animals, the rotten throw pillows, the mildewed best-sellers from other summers, everything cheap and ruined and left behind.

Where is the shovel? (224)

Following the structural pattern used in the opening paragraph, the narrator's preoccupation with the dead child is again addressed at the beginning of the second section as the narrator names the particular rooms of the house from which the gravestone can be seen. Additional examples of repetition found in these lines include instances where the narrator mentions her "husband," the "junk" or "crap" left in the house, the "previous owners" and the "shovel."

Because a number of seemingly unrelated ideas are expressed throughout the story in a free-flowing, stream of conscious narrative style, readers might miss the connection between the repeated words and phrases which hint at the motive behind the woman's anger. In the section, the narrator and her husband are busy removing unwanted items from the garage that were left by the previous owners. This act parallels the woman's need and desire to remove the grieving

mother and dead child from her life, but because the child is buried directly in front of her house, and also because the mother visits the gravesite daily, the act of forgetting the unpleasant memories related to these two characters is much more difficult than that of removing the unwanted “junk” left in the garage. The narrator uses the first person, possessive pronoun “our” earlier in the story when talking about the house, but this episode marks the first instance in which she directly mentions her husband. In the same sentence used to introduce her husband, she also mentions the “junk,” the “previous owners,” and the “shovel”:

“. . . my *husband* and I have been cleaning out the *junk* that belonged to the *previous owners*, which is why I cannot now find the *shovel* when I reach up to the place where it should be” (emphasis added) (224). Although this sentence directly unites the words and phrases that will soon be repeated later in the section, this statement alone is not enough for readers to understand WHY the woman is so preoccupied with the mother and dead child. The sentence does, however, alert readers that they should pay close attention as more information regarding “the husband,” “junk,” “previous owners” and “the shovel” is forthcoming. The narration continues:

I wanted to ask my husband if you call it a baby at the age of five months.

I mean five *unborn* months!

According to him, my husband, the date on the stone is only the month and the year. But I have not crossed the street to see if that is really what the stone says. (224)

It is important to note that “*unborn*” is the only italicized word found in the story. The word is also used in a sentence ending with an exclamation point, suggesting that the idea is expressed with emotion by the narrator. Prior to this sentence which reveals the age of the newly buried child, the narrator reveals her desire to question her husband about what to call the “unborn” baby. Immediately following the sentence, the narrator again mentions her husband, explaining that while she has never visited the grave, he is aware of what is written on the stone. Later in the story, the narrator continues to distance herself from the mother and child yet directly ties her husband to the two characters when speaking of an old highchair left in the attic by the previous owners:

There was a high chair left behind in the garage, too. It was a pretty good one, I suppose—if you could get yourself not to see Donald Duck saying “Let’s eat!” painted on it. The lousy thing was that he cleaned it up and drove it over to the house she was going to rent for the summer. I suppose he thought it would be a useful thing for her to have for when she had the baby. Well, she never had it! (226)

Although many of the narrator’s lines are used to explain how she purposefully avoids and even “hates” the woman, the husband is involved in the woman’s life and appears to care for her. This attitude is exemplified by the fact that the narrator considers her husband’s attempt to help the woman by cleaning up and giving her a high chair a “lousy thing.” The narrator never explicitly reveals her reasons for hating the woman, but because she continually ties her husband to

the woman through both the sentence structure of the story, as well as through the various kind acts expressed by the husband towards the woman, the argument can be made that the narrator's husband is the father of the dead child. Also, because the child was recently buried and died at "five *unborn* months," it is likely that the narrator has known of the affair for just a short time. This further explains her ill feelings towards the woman.

The "shovel," which the narrator searches for throughout the story, becomes an important phallic symbol when the story is read with the affair in mind. The "shovel" is first mentioned when the narrator and her husband are clearing the "junk" out of the garage (224). Certainly, a person might use a shovel to clean out a garage, but because the narrator speaks of "previous owners" in the same sentence, and because the shovel is never found, the argument can be made that the "shovel" also symbolically represents the husband's penis which the narrator had at least temporarily lost through the affair. As the story progresses, the woman's anger and frustration in not being able to find the "shovel" and all it represents builds and finally boils over in the final sentence: "For the rest of my habitation in this house, in this marriage, her baby will be buried in my life unless I can make my way to back behind the stacks of shingles and to back behind the row of storm doors and to back behind the rolled hammock—and maybe find the goddamn shovel" (227). Like most Hempel stories, a simple surface reading of "The Annex" might suffice for most readers to enjoy and gain a general understanding of the primary theme, but as in all great minimalist works, true and lasting meaning must be mined for.

Similar to the minimalist stories written by Hemingway and Carver, Hempel's narrators rarely say all that they want to say, but meaning is always waiting to be found just below the surface. Although Hempel's highly minimalist style of writing is challenging, her trust that readers can "make some sense out of" her stories is reassuring (Sapp 88). Perhaps more than any other minimalist writer, Hempel proves time and time again that if readers are willing to accept the challenge and put forth the necessary effort to find lasting meaning in a work, a writer does not need to spell everything out to write a successful story. With Hempel, it is often the journey, not the destination that matters most.

CHAPTER V

CORMAC MCCARTHY: A NEW FACE IN AMERICAN MINIMALISM

Cormac McCarthy is considered by many readers to be the best living writer of American fiction. Like most great writers, however, McCarthy is difficult to classify. Throughout his lengthy career which spans nearly half a century, McCarthy has regularly been called a regionalist, a Western writer, a thriller writer, a historical writer, and most recently, a post-apocalyptic writer. His major works, which consist of ten novels, two plays and a screenplay, span a number of genres. McCarthy's early Tennessee works are generally labeled as Southern Gothic, *Blood Meridian* and the novels comprising *The Border Trilogy* are viewed as Westerns or anti-Westerns, and his latest novel, *The Road*, is set in the post-apocalyptic future. A close analysis of McCarthy's major works shows that the author has moved from a writer that once selectively used minimalist techniques to structure his stories into a multifaceted writer of minimalist fiction that is currently stripping his works to a level not previously matched in his writing career.

The argument that minimalist tendencies can be linked to many of McCarthy's works does not suggest that McCarthy has always been a dedicated practitioner of minimalism. In most respects, McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, *Suttree*, and the philosophically challenging novel, *The Crossing*, are non-minimalist works. However, and following the style introduced in McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, minimalist markers such as limited punctuation and lengthy passages of dialogue sans exposition exist in all of McCarthy's works.

Therefore, from a stylistic, sentence-level perspective, the argument can be made that select portions of all of McCarthy's works are structurally minimalist in nature. In his latest works, however, McCarthy not only continues to experiment with, and build on his unique, minimalist writing style, he also employs other striking minimalist techniques including, but not limited to, heavy dialogue, ambiguous, unreliable narrators and repetition. For these reasons, McCarthy can now be considered as one of the premier contemporary writers of minimalist fiction.

Minimalist Punctuation and "Short Declarative Sentences"

McCarthy's unique approach to punctuation in both his early and latter works is particularly relevant to an examination of minimalism. Minimalist writers often use an abundance of short, even fragmented sentences in their works to focus exclusively on the main ideas expressed by the narrator and characters. McCarthy is certainly no stranger to such sentences, especially in his three latest works. One of the ways in which McCarthy's writing style differs from most other authors, however, is in the highly minimalist manner in which he omits punctuation in his stories. According to Linda Woodson, McCarthy's poetic language is highlighted by the omission of punctuation:

Through poetic sentences reflecting the ruptures and rhythms of presymbolic language (that which McCarthy indicates is the language of the heart) and through its other characteristics of oral language—for example, the lack of punctuation such as the

absence of apostrophes in contractions and the omission of quotation marks and speaker tags, which would call attention to the written language itself—McCarthy’s fiction creates a place between the real and the word while the relationship between the two is interrogated continuously through the insinuation of contemporary language philosophy into the words of the characters themselves. (“De los herejes y huérfanos: The sound and sense of Cormac McCarthy’s border fiction” 201)

In “Life After Armageddon,” Adam Mars-Jones further examines how McCarthy excludes punctuation when contrasting McCarthy to Beckett: “McCarthy has his own idea of thrift, as he shows with his eccentric rationing of punctuation (dont, musnt, wasnt), but he reverses the linguistic parsimoniousness of the master. Beckett’s late style was very pared down, but McCarthy reverts to a poetic register closer to Yeats: ‘All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain,’ for example” (27). In a rare, 2007 interview with Oprah Winfrey, McCarthy stated the following observations in regard to his unique approach to punctuation which has evolved from relatively sparse in his early novels, to nearly nonexistent in his latest works:

James Joyce is a good model for punctuation. He keeps it to an absolute minimum. There’s no reason to block the page up with weird little marks. If you write properly, you shouldn’t have to punctuate Punctuation is important. It’s important to punctuate so that it makes it easy for people to read. It’s to make it easier, not

to make it harder Simple declarative sentences. I believe in periods and capitals and the occasional comma, and that's it.

(Winfrey Interview)

McCarthy's belief that writers should use punctuation sparingly and write in "simple declarative sentences" has always been evident in his works, but commas, apostrophes and speaker tags have increasingly been omitted in his stories throughout his career. For instance, in the opening pages of *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy's first novel, the following conversation takes place between a hitchhiking Kenneth Rattner and a passing motorist:

Say now, he said. You goin t'wards town?

The man stopped and looked around, spied him propped against an oil drum. Yeah, he said. You want a ride in?

Why now I shore would preciate it, he said, shuffling toward the man now. My daughter she's in the hospital there and I got to get in to see her tonight . . .

Hospital? Where's that? the man asked.

Why, the one in Atlana. The big one there . . .

Oh, said the man. Well, I'm jest goin as fer as Austell. (9-10)

In this passage which is characteristic of the style used throughout the novel, conventional quotation marks used to signify that a conversation is being shared between the characters are not found. Commas and speaker tags are included, however, giving the novel somewhat of a traditional feel. The passage highlights McCarthy's propensity to use punctuation sparingly, but when compared to his

latest works, it is evident that McCarthy is now stripping his stories of punctuation to a much greater extent. Most of the dialogue-driven passages between the father and son in McCarthy's latest novel, *The Road*, are presented in the following nonconventional, highly minimalist fashion:

Do you know where we are Papa? the boy said.

Sort of.

How sort of?

Well. I think we're about two hundred miles from the coast.

As the crow flies.

As the crow flies?

Yes. It means going in a straight line.

Are we going to get there soon?

Not real soon. Pretty soon. We're not going as the crow flies.

Because crows dont have to follow roads?

Yes.

They can go wherever they want.

Yes.

Do you think there might be crows somewhere?

I dont know. (156-157)

Because McCarthy uses what he calls "simple declarative sentences" both here and throughout the novel when presenting dialogue between the father and son, commas are generally unnecessary. Similarly, McCarthy employs the minimalist

technique of limiting speaker tags throughout *The Road* to realistically mirror how actual conversation between a young son and his father might be expressed through the spoken word. In this instance, just a single speaker tag, “the boy said,” is used to begin the conversation and inform readers of who begins the back and forth dialogue between characters. Structural omissions such as these, which are found on most pages of the novel, also parallel and serve as a reminder that the dead and dying, post-apocalyptic world has been stripped to a bare minimum. According to Woodson, short sentences, expressed both through dialogue and narration, serve as a constant reminder that the father and son are perpetually in danger and struggling for survival:

Although the choice of words is rich and poetic, with few exceptions, the descriptive language calls attention to the immediate surroundings through which the man and boy travel, more an echo than a shaper of those surroundings. These descriptions generally avoid the extremely long sentences of some of McCarthy’s former novels, the sentences that, in their complexity and use of metaphor, create a reality of their own. The substantive language is appropriate in a world where humans are reduced to the most basic struggles for food and shelter. (“Mapping *The Road* in Post-Postmodernism” 93)

When lengthy sentences do occur in the novel, connecting words like “and” and “or” are employed in place of punctuation to keep the action moving. This particular technique is used to describe one of the father’s most beautiful

memories: “In that long ago somewhere very near this place he’d watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowsy plumage in the still autumn air” (20). Considering that birds, especially rare and majestic birds such as the falcon, no longer exist in the world of *The Road*, this passage is particularly sad and thought-provoking. The minimalist structure of the passage, however, permits readers little time to reminisce about life before the apocalypse. Furthermore, and consistent with the violent and predatory nature of the novel, the passage ends with the falcon attacking and killing a crane. The section immediately following this memory, which is related in short, choppy sentences characteristic of the novel, brings readers along with the two protagonists immediately back to the cold, unrelenting world: “The grainy air. The taste of it never left your mouth. They stood in the rain like farm animals. Then they went on, holding the tarp over them in the dull drizzle. Their feet were wet and cold and their shoes were being ruined. On the hillsides old crops dead and flattened. The barren ridgeline trees raw and black in the rain” (21).

Narration and Dialogue in *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*

In contrast to the often complex, highly philosophical language used by McCarthy in many of his early works, the narration and dialogue used throughout *The Road* is accessible and direct. The conversations between the father and son and also between the protagonists and other characters are generally short

and to the point, often vague or understated, and extremely simple both in terms of the vocabulary used and the subject matter discussed in the passages. The impact of such dialogue, especially when mixed with detailed passages describing the action, is highly effective. For instance, upon entering the outskirts of a city, the father and son stumble across a deserted supermarket containing two “softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar” (23). Following a detailed passage describing the ruined state of the supermarket which concludes with the father finding a single can of Coca Cola in the “works of the gutted machines,” (23) the following conversation ensues between the father and son:

What is it, Papa?

It’s a treat. For you.

What is it?

Here. Sit down.

He slipped the boy’s knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy. Go ahead, he said.

The boy took the can. It’s bubbly, he said.

Go ahead.

He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It’s really good, he said.

Yes. It is.

You have some, Papa.

I want you to drink it.

You have some.

He took the can and sipped it and handed it back. You drink it, he said. Let's just sit here.

It's because I won't ever get to drink another one, isn't it?

Ever's a long time.

Okay, the boy said. (23-24)

In this example, which is characteristic of the novel, the father never directly answers the boy's questions, but his simplistic responses ("It's a treat. For you."), and his selfless encouragement ("Go ahead I want you to drink it") reveals to both the boy and readers more than words ever could.

There are other possible reasons explaining why McCarthy would choose to employ minimalist dialogue throughout in *The Road*. For example, the stripped dialogue mirrors the barren world in which food, color, natural beauty and most forms of human interaction are quickly becoming extinct. The father and son are alone, and past experience has taught the man that outsiders cannot be trusted because the lack of food and water has driven many of the survivors to murder and even cannibalism. The narrator never reveals the boy's exact age, but his growing knowledge of good and evil, which is represented by his desire to always "carry the fire," his strong desire to love and care for others no matter the situation, and the simple fact that he is learning to read suggests that

the boy is around five or six years old. As a young child, the boy's vocabulary and level of comprehension concerning the world in which he lives is naturally less developed than that of his father. These fundamental differences help explain why many of the passages between the two characters, often highlighting the child's inquisitive nature, are brief and to the point. For instance, the discovery of a waterfall leads to the following conversation:

The waterfall fell into the pool almost at its center. A gray curd circled. They stood side by side calling to each other over the din.

Is it cold?

Do you want to go in?

I dont know.

Sure you do.

Is it okay?

Come on. (38-39)

Following a brief swim in the freezing water, the father and son continue to walk through the woods and soon stumble across a patch of dried mushrooms:

What is it, Papa?

Morels. It's morels.

What's morels?

They're a kind of mushroom.

Can you eat them?

Yes. Take a bite.

Are they good?

Take a bite.

The boy smelled the mushroom and bit into it and stood chewing. He looked at his father. These are pretty good, he said.

(40)

Similar to these examples, most of the passages between the father and son consist of simple questions asked by the son followed by short responses given by the father. The concise and direct manner in which the man responds to his son's questions should not be falsely interpreted as a lack of caring on the father's behalf. On the contrary, the father's curt responses suggest that he deeply loves his son. In both passages, the father encourages his son, then retreats, allowing the boy to learn and act for himself. The father realizes that his son is intelligent and capable of forming his own ideas. He also realizes that his own life could end at any given moment. In these and other instances, the minimalist technique of silence is used by the father to teach his son the importance of self-reliance. Rather than shaping his son's opinions through his words, the father chooses to remain silent, allowing the son to learn and experience how to cope with the harsh realities of life on his own.

In some instances, the minimalist dialogue used between the father and son directly relates to the fact that the boy was born shortly after the apocalyptic event occurred. This information is revealed to readers in the same passage used by the narrator to describe the event which introduces the apocalypse:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didnt answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass. He dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening?" (52-53).

The narrator begins the passage revealing that "a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" begins the apocalypse. This paragraph represents the first and only time that the narrator mentions the catastrophic event.

Therefore, certain readers might miss the symbolic meaning which is subtly revealed through the phrase, "She was ... cradling her belly in one hand."

Because the young protagonist is an only child, the assumption can be made that he is the same child that was once "cradled" while inside his pregnant mother's stomach during the initial moments of the catastrophe. Unlike the father, the child has never lived in a world where fear and death were not a regular part of daily life. As a result of the apocalypse and its brutal aftermath, most animals, plants and modern technologies no longer exist in the world. Because the father realizes that most, if not all things destroyed by the apocalypse will never be the same, he often chooses to keep past memories to himself in an attempt to protect his son both physically and emotionally. This realization is evidenced in

the opening pages of the story when the father and son discover a roadside gas station. The characters enter the station hoping to find food or other useful supplies:

The door to the service bay was open and he went in. A standing metal toolbox against one wall. He went through the drawers but there was nothing that he could use. Good half-inch drive sockets. A ratchet. He stood looking around the garage. A metal barrel full of trash. He went into the office. Dust and ash everywhere. The boy stood in the door. A metal desk, a cashregister. Some old automotive manuals, swollen and sodden. The linoleum was stained and curling from the leaking roof. He crossed to the desk and stood there. Then he picked up the phone and dialed the number of his father's house in that long ago. The boy watched him. What are you doing? he said. (6-7)

In this descriptive passage related in short and fragmented sentences, the narrator lists many items that might be found in a gas station, then states that the man picks up a phone and “dial[s] the number of his father’s house.” The son’s four-word question, “What are you doing?” concludes the paragraph and represents the only dialogue used in the episode. The paragraph is followed by a three-line break in the text. This technique, commonly used by minimalist writers, represents a passing of time. Immediately following the textual break, the narration continues: “A quarter mile down the road he stopped and looked back. We’re not thinking, he said. We have to go back” (7). Due to the rapid

shift in action and location, it is easy to overlook the importance of the son's question. The vagueness of the question might suggest that the boy has never seen a phone before. It is also possible that the boy understands that phones were once used for communication, and therefore, he asks the question because he knows that his father is aware that most forms of communication, including telephone communication, are no longer possible. Considering that a response is not immediately given, and nothing else is mentioned in regards to the strange phone call, the assumption can be made that the father chooses not to tell his son that he had dialed the old number of his father. Furthermore, because the episode is related by a third-person, objective narrator, readers are never given a reason explaining why the man chooses to dial the number of his father in the first place. The man certainly understands that the phone will not work, and while readers do not know the fate of the man's father, considering the current state of the world, he is most likely deceased. The act of placing a call on the dead phone suggests that the man is thinking of his father and past life. Rather than share these memories with his son, which would likely do little but sadden the boy, the man chooses to remain silent. A few pages later, in a seemingly unrelated passage in which the father and son see a "corpse in a doorway dried to leather" (12), the following conversation ensues:

Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever, he [the father] said. You might want to think about that.

You forget some things, dont you?

Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you
remember what you want to forget. (12)

The passage which immediately follows this brief conversation details a past memory in which the father experiences a day at the lake with his uncle when he was a young boy. The two spend their day rowing a boat while enjoying the natural scenery provided by the “clear water” and lush trees with “yellow leaves” (12). The scene concludes with the narrator stating that “neither of them had spoken a word,” yet “this was the perfect day of his childhood” (13). When viewed collectively, the passage describing the phone call, the conversation about remembering and forgetting, and the memory of the scenic, yet silent day at the lake help explain the father’s reasons for keeping past memories to himself. Because the father deeply loves his son, and considers him “his warrant” (5) and “world entire” (6), he often chooses to keep both pleasant and unpleasant memories experienced prior to the apocalypse to himself as a means of protecting his son. The father realizes that the world will never return to the safe and pleasant place of his dreams and memories. For this reason, in place of relating past experiences to his son which might result in false hope or a false sense of security, he internalizes his feelings and attempts to focus exclusively on the present task of taking his son to the coast.

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* can be seen as an early model of literary minimalism. Beckett employs a minimalist setting in the play as both acts take place in the same simple locale featuring a single tree. Although the two primary characters, Estragon and Vladimir, converse, eat, sleep, sing and even

contemplate suicide while waiting for Godot to arrive, there is minimal action in the play, and Godot never appears. Critics agree that the sentence structure, characterization, and language patterns used in the play are also minimalist in nature. Like most minimalist works, however, *Waiting for Godot* is thematically complex. McCarthy employs many of the minimalist techniques used by Beckett, Hemingway and the other minimalist writers examined in this study in his latest thought-provoking play, *The Sunset Limited*. McCarthy's play was first noticed by readers and scholars following the announcement that the play would run in Chicago's Steppenwolf's Garage Theatre during the 2005-2006 season.¹ The play is in many ways the most structurally minimalist of McCarthy's three latest works, but due in large part to the success of *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, and also because the story was written as a short, single-act screenplay, it is often overlooked.

In the play, two characters, generically named "Black" and "White," sit in Black's small tenement apartment discussing their past lives and distinct world views. The primary act which brings the two strangers together occurs just moments before the play begins when Black thwarts White's suicide attempt by pushing him off the tracks of the Sunset Limited subway train. Because the work is written as a play, stage directions highlight whether "Black" or "White" speaks the line/s. The dialogue between the two characters, which takes place inside Black's cramped apartment, begins:

Black So what am I supposed to do with you, Professor?

¹ For an in-depth review of the Chicago Production, see Dianne C. Luce's review, "Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*: Dialogue of Life and Death."

White Why are you supposed to do anything?

Black I done told you. This aint none of my doin. I left out of here this morning to go to work you wasnt no part of my plans at all. But here you is.

White It doesnt mean anything. Everything that happens doesnt mean something else.

Black Mm hm. It dont.

White No. It doesnt.

Black What's it mean then? (3-4)

The omission of apostrophes and other forms of punctuation in these simple sentences mirrors the writing in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* and further illustrates the minimalist style that McCarthy employs in his latest works. The simple, often vague and repetitive nature of the dialogue used both in this exchange and throughout the play also resembles certain passages found in Hemingway's dialogue-driven passages:

"What do you have to eat?" the boy asked.

"A pot of yellow rice with fish. Do you want some?"

"No. I will eat at home. Do you want me to make the fire?"

"No. I will make it later on. Or I may eat the rice cold."

"May I take the cast net?"

"Of course." (*The Old Man and the Sea* 16)

From a strictly stylistic perspective, however, the stripped writing style used by McCarthy in his three latest works is much more extreme than the style used in

his early novels, and even more extreme than Hemingway's minimalist style because there are few commas, apostrophes and quotation marks are generally omitted, and speaker tags are used sparingly, if at all.

The subtitle of *The Sunset Limited, A Novel in Dramatic Form*, suggests that dialogue takes center stage in the play. In "Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited: Dialogue of Life and Death*," Dianne C. Luce presents the following statement made by Martha Lavey: "That [McCarthy] chose the stage as a venue for this conversation suggests that he sees the drama of *The Sunset Limited* as one best unmediated by the narrative voice: he seeks the pure exchange of ideas and he leaves you, the audience, to negotiate your position in that argument" (13). McCarthy's response to the theatrical preparations of Chicago's Steppenwolf's Garage Theatre proves that he had minimalism in mind when writing the play and further supports Lavey's argument that the conversation itself is what matters most to McCarthy:

In April, McCarthy had asked them to perform the entire play "seated at a kitchen table, talking." Patinkin and the actors had been very reluctant to stage it in such a static way, and they had built in considerable physical activity within the tiny corner set. But Pendleton writes that they were "haunted by his [McCarthy's] original suggestion. So when we came back together again for a week in Chicago to rehearse it . . . for this New York run we found ourselves eliminating much of that movement and finally eliminating all of it, except for the two or three specific times that Cormac calls

for it in the script. And it works! (Luce, "Beyond the Border: Cormac McCarthy in the New Millennium" 8)

Ironically, but true of most minimalist texts, both Black and White have much to say, but productive communication between the two is generally impossible because the characters are radically different. White is an extremely well spoken professor, whereas Black is a poor, uneducated blue-collar worker who struggles to express himself through words. These and other issues pose serious problems in the characters' abilities to effectively communicate with each other. Early in the story, for example, White invents a character named Cecil in an attempt to explain why his life is no longer worth living. Instead of focusing on the main idea expressed by White through the analogy, Black is sidetracked by the fact that he doesn't personally know Cecil. Similarly, because Black is a God-fearing Christian, he often uses Biblical references in his efforts to prevent White from again attempting suicide upon leaving the apartment. Unfortunately for Black, White doesn't consider himself a Christian, or even a believer in a Higher Power. For this reason, Black's scriptural-based attempts to help White are rendered useless. Because all attempts at effective communication between the two characters ultimately fail, the story ends with White leaving the apartment, more intent than ever on killing himself. Black has done all he can to "save" White through words, but as is often true in minimalist works, "real" communication proves impossible.

A Minimalist Version of the Unreliable Narrator in *The Crossing*

The Crossing is arguably McCarthy's most challenging philosophical novel. For this reason alone, most readers would not consider the novel to be a minimalist work. Furthermore, the dense writing style, the detailed descriptions of both the landscape and actions of Billy Parham, the lengthy journeys to and from Mexico, and the high number of complex characters are far from minimalist. The narrators used throughout the novel, however, epitomize the minimalist version of the unreliable narrator. Carver scholar Gunter Leypoldt effectively defines how the minimalist version of the unreliable narrator differs from the traditional definition of the technique in his article, "Raymond Carver's 'Development'":

[The] minimalist version of the unreliable narrator achieves its destabilizing effects precisely because its unreliability cannot be relied upon. By offering merely faint intimations that there may be a slightly neurotic or compulsive element involved, an occasional blurring of perspective, the text does not ironize the speaker completely, but merely puts the story's voice in invisible quotation marks, intimating that parts of the narration may be flawed without, however, stating exactly which ones. (326)

Similar to how Carver employs a minimalist version of the unreliable narrator in "So Much Water So Close To Home," McCarthy infuses *The Crossing* with subtle clues suggesting that the primary narrators in the novel are "slightly neurotic" or confused; this technique forces readers to question whether or not the narrators'

words should be trusted. Although various statements made by a number of important characters suggest that *The Crossing* is “a story about storytelling,” because the reliability of the ex-priest, blind man, gypsy, trapper and even the primary narrator is questionable at best, the narration is dominated by ambiguity, leaving readers to decide what to make of the various tales.

In the novel, an ex-priest tells Billy Parham, “Things separate from their stories have no meaning Rightly heard all tales are one” (142-43). A “primadonna,” camped in a field of wildflowers, advises Billy to “Listen to the corridos of the country. They will tell you” (230). Similarly, the outspoken leader of a band of gypsies claims, “La verdad no puede quedar en ningún otro lugar sino en el habla” (411) [The truth cannot remain in any other place but in the spoken word]. Critics might argue that absolute truth can exist in a perfect tale, but because most of the tales related by various narrators are flawed, the reader quickly realizes that truth must be searched for throughout the novel. McCarthy uses a selectively omniscient, minimalist version of the unreliable narrator throughout *The Crossing* to introduce various metaphysical and supernatural “truths,” allowing readers to apply distinct interpretations to a complex story about storytelling.

In fictive works, an unreliable narrator can leave unsuspecting readers confused about how to interpret an entire story or even a particular section of a tale. The mere presence of unreliability in a work, however, should never be misinterpreted as simply “poor” writing. Granted, a careless author might make mistakes in his/her writing leaving readers to view a narrator or character as

unreliable, but skilled authors, such as McCarthy, use the technique of unreliable narration intentionally. In his groundbreaking work, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth states the following insight borrowed from Mark Harris's, "Easy Does It Not":

"I shall not tell you anything," says a fine young novelist in defense of his art. "I shall allow you to eavesdrop on my people, and sometimes they will tell the truth and sometimes they will lie, and you must determine for yourself when they are doing which. You do this every day. Your butcher says, 'This is the best,' and you reply, 'That's you saying it.' Shall my people be less the captive of their desires than your butcher? I can show much, but show only. . . . You will no more expect the novelist to tell you precisely how something is said than you will expect him to stand by your chair and hold your book." (117)

In *The Crossing*, McCarthy's primary narrator and many of the supporting characters "show" much, but "tell" just enough to keep the reader interested and involved in the story. This particular technique is common in minimalist stories as minimalist authors generally attempt to omit all unnecessary information in order to focus exclusively on what they consider to be the most important themes or ideas examined in the text. If readers fail to put forth the effort to interpret the story correctly, many of the lessons McCarthy attempts to teach in *The Crossing* will be missed, and the reasons for the author's use of unreliability as a minimalist tool may fall undetected.

Booth continues, “many stories require confusion in the reader, and the most effective way to achieve it is to use an observer who is himself confused” (284). In *The Crossing*, a nameless, third-person narrator does most of the observing for the reader. To complicate matters, the narrator is selectively omniscient, at times revealing extreme amounts of information and at other times revealing next to nothing. Early in the novel, for example, the narrator appears omniscient. S/he speaks for Billy when stating, “He [Billy] knew that they [the wolves] would be coming out onto the plain” (3). The narrator speaks of the wolves “loping and twisting” (4) and ends the narration: “He never told anybody” (5). A few pages later, the narrator again appears omniscient when speaking on behalf of certain animals: “The dog stood beside him testing the air with quick lifting motions of its muzzle, sorting and assembling some picture of the prior night’s events” (13). Similarly, the narrator speaks on behalf of the wolf pack when referring to the contents of Mr. Echol’s wolf bait: “The inward parts of the beast who dreams of man and has so dreamt in running dreams a hundred thousand years and more. Dreams of that malignant lesser god come pale and naked and alien to slaughter all his clan and kin and rout them from their house” (17). This passage suggests that the narrator not only has the ability to access the thoughts of Billy and others, s/he also understands the thoughts of animals and even speaks of dreams supposedly dreamt more than a hundred thousand years ago. Because the narrator speaks with such a high level of precision, certain readers might hesitate to question what is said. For instance, the narrator states in reference to a wolf print left in the snow, “He [Billy] knelt and blew the

fresh snow out of the crystal print the wolf had made five nights ago” (21). The narrator clearly states that the print was made by the very wolf that Billy tracks, and s/he also states that the print was made exactly five nights ago. The narrator is similarly precise a few pages later:

The wolf had crossed the international boundary line at about the point where it intersected the thirtieth minute of the one hundred and eighth meridian and she had crossed the old Nations road a mile north of the boundary and followed Whitewater Creek west up into the San Luis Mountains and crossed through the gap north to the Animas Valley and on in to the Peloncillos as told. (24)

The narrator uses the phrase “at about” to alert readers that s/he does not know the exact spot where the wolf had crossed the international boundary line.

However, s/he next proceeds to give a lengthy and detailed description of the wolf’s recent travels. These and other examples found early in the novel suggest that the narrator has the ability to be omniscient when s/he chooses, apparently knowing the thoughts, dreams, and actions of both man and beast.

Whether or not the narrator is completely omniscient, at times s/he fails to reveal certain information leaving both the characters and readers confused about what might have been missed in the omission. Early in the story, for example, the narrator states of Billy’s attempt to track the wolf, “Once he rode her up out of a bed in a windbreak thicket on the south slope where she’d slept in the sun. Or thought he rode her up” (32). The narrator begins by speaking on the whereabouts of the wolf, clearly stating that Billy “rode her up.” The second

sentence, however, questions the action supposedly performed in the first of the two sentences. The initial sentence states that Billy spooked the wolf out of hiding, but the second sentence begins with the word “or,” instantly bringing the narrator’s reliability under question. Because this expression of uncertainty occurs suddenly, and is related in such a subtle manner, a careless reader might miss it. Similarly, the narrator describes the face of Billy’s father: “His eyes were very blue and very beautiful half hid away in the leathery seams of his face. As if there were something there that the hardness of the country had not been able to touch” (16). These sentences provide readers with sufficient information to formulate a mental picture of Mr. Parham’s face, but at the same time, readers are left wondering whether or not there actually exists a hidden “something” that the country has not “been able to touch.” The subtle use of the phrase, “as if” raises a question and leaves the matter open to discussion. Another instance displaying how the narrator withholds information is stated moments earlier: “By the time he’d fed and watered it was daylight and he saddled Bird and mounted up and rode out of the barn bay and down to the river to look for the Indian or to see if he was still there” (13). In this detailed sentence, the narrator seemingly reveals all, up and until s/he uses the conjunction “or,” revealing a certain level of uncertainty. Does Billy leave early in the morning with the intent to look for the Indian? This reading would imply that perhaps Billy wants to speak with the Indian. The second possibility is that Billy simply wants to see if the Indian is still camping where he and his brother Boyd had left him the previous evening. In the sentence, the word “and” is also used a number of times to connect the many

actions and ideas being conveyed. According to David Holloway, “The absence of distinct sentences, let alone subordinate clauses, and the simple listing by repetition of ‘and’ quickens the eye faster than ever across the words which describe the scene, denying the reader time in which to pause and reflect upon the significant meaning of any of the discrete objects or actions narrated” (“Modernism, Nature, and Utopia: Another Look at ‘Optical Democracy’ in Cormac McCarthy’s *Western Quartet*” 195-96). This concept is further exemplified in the following sentence:

He [Billy] pulled his breeches off the footboard of the bed and got his shirt and his blanketlined duckingcoat and got his boots from under the bed and went out to the kitchen and dressed in the dark by the faint warmth of the stove and held the boots to the windowlight to pair them left and right and pulled them on and rose and went to the kitchen door and stepped out and closed the door behind him (emphasis added). (3)

This lengthy sentence could easily be simplified (Billy changes into warm clothes in the dark and leaves the kitchen). But in this instance and in countless other places in the novel, the minimalist, unreliable narrator delivers the message in great detail, leaving readers the task of deciphering the information. These techniques and other stylistic issues primarily related by a selectively omniscient, unreliable narrator invite readers to actively participate in the story in an attempt to fill in the missing pieces.

CHAPTER VI

CORMAC MCCARTHY: FROM FAULKNER TO HEMINGWAY

McCarthy has employed and experimented with a number of different writing styles throughout his career and has been compared to literary giants such as Faulkner, O'Connor, Joyce, Melville and even Yeats.¹ In "The Mosaic of McCarthy's Fiction," Edwin T. Arnold writes that, though McCarthy has always been an ever-changing author, common themes and influences are now beginning to emerge in his works:

McCarthy, it seemed to me as I read, was constantly reinventing himself with each new work, telling a new story in a new style and daring the reader to guess what next, or what before. McCarthy's fiction has now begun to take a shape, to reveal its major themes and concerns and influences so that we can start to perceive both the intertextuality of the works—the way they relate or react to, reflect, respond, grow from, and speak against other works, traditions, cultural assumptions, historical surroundings—and the intratextuality of the books—the interconnectedness and cross-fertilization of the stories and images of the stories themselves—as we can thus begin to apprehend the larger construct of McCarthy's art. (45)

¹ In *The Rhetoric of McCarthy's Fiction: Style, Visionary Landscapes, and Parables*, Robert L. Jarrett compares a number of McCarthy's works to Faulkner, Melville, Joyce, O'Connor and other well-known writers. In *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*, John Cant compares McCarthy to Faulkner and Melville. Steven Frye compares and contrasts McCarthy's style to Faulkner and Yeats in "Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium' and McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*: Art and Artifice in the New Novel." Adam Mars-Jones argues in "Life After Armageddon" that the language used in *The Road* resembles the "poetic register" of Yeats.

Beginning with the publication of *No Country for Old Men* (2005), and more notably with the publications of *The Road* (2006) and *The Sunset Limited* (2006), critics have increasingly focused on the minimalist characteristics inherent in these works. In addition, McCarthy's writing style is now being compared to Hemingway, Beckett, Carver and other minimalist writers.²

When one considers that just a handful of years have passed since the publication dates of McCarthy's three most minimalist works, it is not surprising that comparisons of McCarthy to Hemingway are relatively rare when compared to references to Faulkner. Many of the comparisons that have been made to Hemingway, however, strongly indicate that McCarthy is currently using minimalist techniques in his stories to a greater extent than ever before.

According to James Wood:

McCarthy's new novel [*No Country for Old Men*] has almost none of the battered ormolu that makes his earlier prose so distinctive.

There is one hokey moment when a violent assassin named Anton Chigurh stands over a Mexican drug dealer and shoots him, "watching his own image degrade in that squandered world," and the reader anticipates a rising paragraph of ornate plaint. But McCarthy is content here, which is in keeping with the spirit of the

² Steven Frye in *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* and Walter Kirn in "No Country for Old Men: Texas Noir" compare McCarthy to Hemingway. In "Life After Armageddon," Adam Mars-Jones compares and contrasts McCarthy's writing style in *The Road* to Beckett's style. James Wood argues in "Getting to the End" that select portions of *The Road* resemble the writing style of both Hemingway and Carver.

novel. Everything is tight, reduced, simple, and very violent. (“The Sanguinary Sublime of Cormac McCarthy” par. 12)

Similarly, Frye writes in a paragraph reminding readers that McCarthy borrowed the title *No Country for Old Men* from Yeats’s poem, “Sailing to Byzantium,”: “The novel [*No Country for Old Men*] presents fewer intellectual challenges since its style is direct, with virtually no archaic vocabulary and few syntactic complexities. The sentences are reminiscent of Hemingway’s, as are the characters, and Hemingway’s influence on the novel is reinforced by McCarthy’s deliberate allusions to his predecessor’s works in *The Road*” (156). The thirteen numbered chapters in *No Country for Old Men* all begin with an italicized monologue detailing the thoughts of the protagonist, small-town Sheriff Ed Tom Bell. In most of these monologues, Bell struggles to understand the nature of violence, much of which stems from the Mexican/American drug trade that has infiltrated the borderlands in and around Sanderson, Texas. The non-italicized portions which make up the bulk of the novel relate the story of a drug deal gone wrong and the events that follow. McCarthy uses a third-person objective narrator, as well as lengthy passages of dialogue between characters to tell the story. As Frye suggests, both the sentence structure and the language used by the narrator and all of the characters in the novel are reminiscent of Hemingway: “*I sent one boy to the gaschamber at Huntsville. One and only one. My arrest and my testimony. I went up there and visited with him two or three times. Three times. The last time was the day of his execution*” (3). I agree with Frye that nearly all of the characters found in the novel and perhaps most notably the ghost-like,

highly psychopathic villain Anton Chigurh are similar to many of Hemingway's minimalist characters, as the feelings and motives which drive the characters are seldom if ever conclusively revealed. It is interesting to note, however, that though Sheriff Bell often speaks like a character straight out of a Hemingway story, in a highly non-minimalist move McCarthy uses the italicized portions of the novel to allow readers directly into Bell's head, revealing the sheriff's deepest worries and regrets as well as his greatest memories and triumphs.³ For this reason, the argument can be made that Sheriff Bell is the best developed character in all of McCarthy's works with perhaps the exception of Cornelius Suttree. In choosing to break the minimalist "law" that exposition and emotion have no place in a minimalist text, McCarthy challenges traditional definitions of minimalism and differentiates his minimalist style from that of Hemingway and other minimalist writers.

McCarthy's early works and writing style should be examined in order to prove that McCarthy is now choosing to increasingly use minimalist techniques in his writing. *The Orchard Keeper*, *Child of God* and *Suttree* are all set in and around Knoxville, Tennessee. McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark* is also set in an unspecified place in Appalachia. For this reason, it is not surprising that critics often compare McCarthy's early works to many of Faulkner's stories which are predominantly set in Mississippi.⁴ In addition to this Southern connection,

³ A strong example of McCarthy allowing readers inside Bell's mind is presented in the final dialogue between Bell and his Uncle Ellis. In the passage, Bell admits his greatest regret when stating that he "cut and run" from the Germans during a WWII battle in place of staying to protect his wounded comrades (*No Country for Old Men* 272-280).

⁴ For an interesting point of view concerning similarities in the Southern settings of McCarthy's early works to Faulkner, see Wood's "The Sanguinary Sublime of Cormac McCarthy."

comparisons can also be made between McCarthy's early writing style and the complex and highly emotional style used by Faulkner in many of his stories. As Frye notes, countless Faulkneresque examples of "dens[e] structure, expression, and word choice" can be found in all of McCarthy's novels written prior to *No Country For Old Men* (153). In *Outer Dark*, for instance, McCarthy's ability to share ideas through complex expressions and words is exemplified in the final of six italicized passages used to map the movements and evil exploits of the mysterious, almost mystical group of wanderers:

What discordant vespers do the tinker's goods chime through the long twilight and over the brindled forest road, him stooped and hounded through the windy recrements of day like those old exiles who divorced of corporeality and enjoined ingress of heaven or hell wander forever the middle warrens spoorless increate and anathema. Hounded by grief, by guilt, or like this cheerless vendor clamored at heel through wood and fen by his own querulous and inconsolable wares in perennial tin malediction. (229)

In this difficult paragraph, the narrator uses the phrases "discordant vespers," "windy recrements," and "middle warrens spoorless increate and anathema." Furthermore, few readers would argue that sentences such as "Hounded by grief, by guilt, or like this cheerless vendor clamored at heel through wood and fen by his own querulous and inconsolable wares in perennial tin malediction" supports McCarthy's current belief that language is best delivered in "simple declarative sentences." Though portions of McCarthy's Appalachian and

Western works can be compared to the dense structure and vocabulary found in Faulkner, this comparison does not suggest that minimalist characteristics are nonexistent in his early works. For instance, *Outer Dark* begins with the narrator introducing readers to the band of wanderers:

They crested out on the bluff in the late afternoon sun with their shadows long on the sawgrass and burnt sedge, moving single file and slowly high above the river and with something of its own implacability, pausing and grouping for a moment and going on again strung out in silhouette against the sun and then dropping under the crest of the hill into a fold of blue shadow with light touching them about the head in spurious sanctity until they had gone on for such a time as saw the sun down altogether and they moved in shadow altogether which suited them very well. (3)

The subject matter and word choice used in this lengthy sentence is not particularly complex, but the fact that McCarthy begins the story with a single sentence consisting of 105 words is highly reminiscent of Faulkner. In “Barn Burning,” for example, the action- packed climactic scene which describes a number of important events including the burning of Major De Spain’s barn, the probable death of Sarty’s brother and father, and Sarty’s flight from danger and past life is related in the following sentence:

He could not hear either: the galloping mare was almost upon him before he heard her, and even then he held his course, as if the very urgency of his wild grief and need must in a moment more find

him wings, waiting until the ultimate instant to hurl himself aside and into the weed-choked roadside ditch as the horse thundered past and on, for an instant in furious silhouette against the stars, the tranquil early summer night sky which, even before the shape of the horse and rider vanished, stained abruptly and violently upward: a long, swirling roar incredible and soundless, blotting the stars, and he springing up and into the road again, running again, knowing it was too late yet still running even after he heard the shot and an instant later, two shots, pausing now without knowing he had ceased to run, crying, "Pap! Pap!", running again before he knew he had begun to run, stumbling, tripping over something and scrabbling up again without ceasing to run, looking backward over his shoulder at the glare as he got up, running on among the invisible trees, panting, sobbing, "Father! Father!" (171)

The structural similarities between the two passages is perhaps more apparent than the subtle differences as just a single sentence is used to describe the action in both of these lengthy episodes. However, whereas Faulkner uses a traditional style of punctuation—a number of commas, exclamation points and two sets of quotation marks in this emotional scene, McCarthy's passage includes just two commas. As mentioned in my discussion on the unreliable narrator in *The Crossing*, in place of using conventional punctuation to create slight pauses in the action, McCarthy often uses the conjunction "and" to connect ideas and keep the action moving. As Frye notes, McCarthy's tendency to use

“and” in place of punctuation is a major difference between the writing styles of the two authors:

Both authors share a willingness to employ the language experimentally, to carry syntax, subordination, and word choice in complex and interesting directions. But careful stylistic analysis reveals differences as well, particularly in Faulkner’s tendency to employ multiple levels of subordination in stream of conscious narrative, as compared to McCarthy’s propensity to link independent clauses with the conjunction “and” thus creating extended lyrical passages with limited subordination. (153)⁵

Not only does the narrator use “and” in place of punctuation in this particular passage, s/he repeats the word “shadow” three times to highlight the primary message expressed in the episode. In this particular instance, the word “shadow” certainly reveals that the sun is setting, but more importantly, common connotations of the term suggest that the men are evil, ghost-like, and up to no good. In this particular instance, McCarthy uses the minimalist technique of repetition on the opening page of the novel to create an ominous tone as the narrator indirectly alerts readers that the men will play important, but sinister roles in the events to follow. Although few readers would consider *Outer Dark* to be a highly minimalist work, because the novel includes a number of minimalist trademarks, the argument can be made that McCarthy has been experimenting with minimalist characteristics from the very beginning of his writing career.

⁵ In “The Sanguinary Sublime of Cormac McCarthy,” James Wood argues that McCarthy’s creative use of “and” represents “one of the reasons that McCarthy is so often called a mythic, or Biblical, primordial writer (par. 3).”

In *No Country for Old Men*, the minimalist tool of repetition is used by McCarthy to an extent never before seen in his works. As Wood notes in a comparison to Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, the characters in *No Country for Old Men* are often shown "thinking," but because exposition is limited whenever possible throughout the minimalist text, readers are seldom if ever told exactly how the characters respond to their "thoughts":

Throughout the book [*No Country for Old Men*], the characters, if the word can be applied to these medallions of murder, fall into thought. But it turns out to be a briskly end-stopped affair: "He stood there thinking about that." "He sipped the wine and when the steak came he cut into it and chewed slowly and thought about his life." "He sat on the bed thinking things over. . . .He thought about a lot of things but the thing that stayed with him was that at some point he was going to have to quit running on luck." "I stood out there a long time and I thought about things." Here is Hemingway's influence, so popular in male American fiction, of both the pulpy and the highbrow kind. It recalls the language of *A Farewell to Arms*: "He looked very dead. It was raining. I had liked him as well as anyone I ever knew." What appears to be thought is in fact suppressed thought, the mere ratification of male taciturnity. The attempt to stifle sentimentality—"He looked very dead"—itself comes to seem a sentimental mannerism. ("The Sanguinary Sublime of Cormac McCarthy" par. 10)

By constantly repeating throughout the story that the characters are left only to “think” about a wide variety of things, readers, like the characters, are encouraged to “think” about how they themselves might react to the particular situation at hand. Because *No Country for Old Men* is arguably McCarthy’s most action-packed novel, on first glance it appears somewhat ironic that the terms “silence” and “nothing,” or close variants thereof, are also repeated throughout the work.⁶ The “silence/nothing” motif is introduced and consistently repeated throughout the opening section of the novel that details Llewellyn Moss’s gruesome discovery of a drug deal gone wrong:

“The barrial stood silent and empty in the sun. As if nothing had occurred there at all” (10). “He lowered the glasses. Then he raised them again. Then he lowered them and just sat there. Nothing moved” (11). “He stopped and listened. Nothing” (12). “Then he wiped his finger on his jeans and pulled the tarp back over the parcels and stepped back and looked over the country again. Nothing” (13). “He glassed the country to the south. Nothing” (15). “He watched it for a long time through the binoculars. Nothing moved” (16-17). “Dead quiet. Not even a dog” (23). “He parked at the gate and got out and opened it and drove through and got out and closed it again and stood listening to the silence” (25). “No coyotes. Nothing” (26). “He approached with

⁶ McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* is also a highly action-packed novel. However, because McCarthy intended to write *No Country for Old Men* as a thriller (and the Oscar award winning film by the Cohen brothers successfully highlights many of the thrilling aspects of the work), I propose that *No Country for Old Men* is McCarthy’s most action-packed work.

the .45 cocked in his hand. Dead quiet” (27). “He studied the blue floodplain out there in the silence” (30). “He stood and listened. Not a coyote, nothing” (31). “He turned and looked back toward the rim, blowing and backpedaling through the slateblue water. Nothing there” (33). “A redwing blackbird. Nothing” (35). “Mountains in the far and middle distance. Nothing out there” (36).

This lengthy list of repeated words and phrases serves an important purpose in the opening pages of the novel. First of all, the narrator’s simple, often fragmented statements that the country is now “silent” and “empty” stands in direct contrast to the bloody events that occurred moments before when the countryside was ablaze with automatic gunfire. As a thriller, the novel is certainly action-packed, but in a clever minimalist move, the first great battle which serves as the catalyst to the violence that occurs throughout the novel occurs “offstage” and is highlighted primarily by what now exists—“silence” and “nothing,” instead of by what existed a few short hours prior to Moss’s discovery. The repetition also allows both readers and Moss a moment to stop and consider what has taken place and the possible repercussions of Moss’s decision to take the money. The barrial might be “silent” and “empty” for the moment, but because the motif is constantly repeated, readers are alerted in the early pages of the novel that Moss’s life is about to be turned upside-down and become noisy and full. Ultimately, and in an unfortunate twist of fate, Moss will soon be “silenced” and become “nothing” as he is hunted down and killed by a band of Mexican drug dealers. Moss hits his lowest point when he struggles to escape from a

Mexican hospital and cross the border into the United States after being severely wounded in a gun-battle. At this moment, Moss is both figuratively and literally left with nothing as the stolen drug money is no longer in his possession and the murderous Chigurh is rapidly closing in on his wife Clara:

They took him inside and sat him in a steel chair in a small white office. Another man came in and stood leaning against a steel desk. He looked him over.

How much have you had to drink?

I aint had anything to drink.

What happened to you?

What do you mean?

What happened to your clothes.

I dont know.

Do you have any identification?

No.

Nothing.

No. (187)

The “silence/nothing” motif which is repeated throughout the novel closes with the uneventful details of Moss’s death. Much like the opening gun battle which occurs outside the actual novel, Moss is killed “offstage” and the aftermath is related to both Bell and readers second-hand by a young deputy (237). True to the minimalist nature of the novel, Moss is removed in an uneventful fashion the moment he is no longer needed in the story.

Critics of McCarthy's early works often focus on dark and difficult passages, highlighting the role that the unforgiving landscapes play in the stories. For example, in "History and the Ugly Facts," an article examining McCarthy's treatment of narration and description in *Blood Meridian*, Dana Phillips writes:

Potent landscapes inform all of McCarthy's work, from *The Orchard Keeper*, his first novel, to *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*, helping to shape the best-selling and supposedly more humane *All the Pretty Horses*. In all these texts, McCarthy describes terrain of which we are ordinarily only fleetingly aware, a landscape that looms in the background of the opening frames of many movie Westerns and through which many a literary cowboy has ridden. But as McCarthy shows, this landscape is capable of more than looming. (30)

An example of McCarthy's early descriptive style, what Phillips terms, a "potent landscape," is found in the opening pages of *All The Pretty Horses*. The narrator introduces John Grady Cole to the story as he stands watching a train pass in the cold, windless night:

As he turned to go he heard the train. He stopped and waited for it. He could feel it under his feet. It came boring out of the east like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance and the long light of the headlamp running through the tangled mesquite brakes and creating out of the night the endless fenceline down the dead straight right of way and sucking it back again wire and post mile on mile into the darkness after where the

boilersmoke disbanded slowly along the faint new horizon and the sound came lagging and he stood still holding his hat in his hands in the passing ground-shudder watching it till it was gone. Then he turned and went back to the house. (3-4)

In this passage, McCarthy includes a Faulkneresque, hundred-word sentence to characterize how industrialization, which is represented by a “howling” and “bellowing” train, both disrupts the calm, natural wildness of the landscape and encroaches on the cowboy lifestyle of the Cole family. Similarly, *Suttree* begins with a lengthy passage full of difficult, highly descriptive terms to introduce the Huck Finn-like world of Cornelius Suttree:

Peering down into the water where the morning sun fashioned wheels of light, coronets fanwise in which lay trapped each twig, each grain of sediment, long flakes and blades of light in the dusty water sliding away like optic strobes where motes sifted and spun. A hand trails over the gunwale and he lies athwart the skiff, the toe of one sneaker plucking periodic dimples in the river with the boat's slight cradling, drifting down beneath the bridge and slowly past the mud-stained stanchions. Under the high cool arches and dark keeps of the span's undercarriage where pigeons babble and the hollow flap of their wings echoes in stark applause. Glancing up at these cathedraled vaultings with their fossil woodknots and pseudomorphic nailheads in gray concrete, drifting, the bridge's slant shadow leaning the width of the river with that headlong

illusion postulate in old cupracers frozen on photoplates, their wheels elliptic with speed. These shadows form over the skiff, accommodate his prone figure and pass on. (7)

Highly descriptive passages detailing the natural landscape play vital roles in all of McCarthy's works written prior to 2005. In *No Country for Old Men*, *The Sunset Limited*, and even in lengthy portions of *The Road* which is set primarily outdoors, however, McCarthy limits, or omits altogether such lengthy passages. Instead, and as is most clearly seen in *The Sunset Limited*, large portions of the stories take place inside cramped, indoor spaces common to minimalist stories. It is important to note that although tight, indoor spaces play major roles in all three of McCarthy's latest works, in contrast to traditional minimalist settings in which kitchens and living-rooms are used to provide a sense of comfort and familiarity to both readers and characters, McCarthy's indoor spaces are far from "safe." According to Susan Tyburski, the setting of *The Sunset Limited* has more in common with the setting of *The Road* than first meets the eye:

The Sunset Limited and *The Road* present impossible fictional worlds. Closer inspection of the two, however, yields a payload of unobtrusive correspondences—syntactical similarities, phrasal repetitions, common rhetorical figures, convergent thematic concerns The "landscape" of *The Sunset Limited* is, in its way, just as barren as the cadaverous world of *The Road*. The characters spend most of the play seated in "two chrome and plastic chairs" at a "cheap formica table. Their abstract debate

about the existence of God and the meaning of life occurs in Black's dreary tenement apartment, behind a strangely barricaded door. (107, 122)

Because the father and son in *The Road* are homeless wanderers, the burnt and ruined, post-apocalyptic "landscape" is mentioned in some form or another on practically every page as the sparseness of the landscape directly determines the choices made by the characters. *The Road* begins with the narrator describing the landscape:

When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath. He pushed away the plastic tarpaulin and raised himself in the stinking robes and blankets and looked toward the east for any light but there was none. (3)

True of all minimalist passages, vital information is revealed in these introductory sentences. The story begins in medias res, with a man and child struggling to survive the bitter "cold" and "darkness" of the night. The man touches the child in the opening line providing a brief glimpse into the loving bond which exists between the two characters. In the second sentence, the narrator states that the nights were "dark beyond darkness," and "the days more gray each one than what had gone before." In this sentence, the narration is purposefully redundant,

suggesting that the “darkness” of the night is beyond all comprehension. For the same reason, the word “cold” is used for the second time in just three short lines in the third sentence. The fourth sentence, “His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath,” heightens the suspense and informs readers that the man not only loves the child, but he worries that the “coldness” of the night might kill the boy. In the final sentence, the narrator mentions both the “plastic tarpaulin” on which the man and boy sleep and the “stinking robes and blankets” to further reinforce the dire condition of the two protagonists. The fact that the man sees only darkness when gazing to the east suggests not only that the night is still young, but most importantly, it suggests death which is a dominant and recurrent topic examined in the novel. Variations of this opening scene which details the “cold,” “dark” and “grayness” of the unrelenting landscape, and the effects that this landscape has on the characters, can be found on virtually every page of the novel. For instance, in the opening ten pages of the novel the narrator uses the following terms, or a variation thereof, to describe the scene and surrounding landscape:

dark, cold, gray, barren, silent, godless, murky, ashen, dead, colorless, dangerous, dusty, broken, trashy, swollen, sodden, stained, curling, leaking, stark, black, burned, charred, limbless, sagging, blind, rainy, whining, raw, abandoned, faded, weathered, wasted, nothing, dry, nameless, wet, windy, streaked, old, uncoupled, unsupported, trembling, paling, and lifeless. (3-12)

In contrast to his early trademark style of using lengthy descriptive passages to set the scene, McCarthy reinvents himself in *The Road* when relying primarily on simple words and phrases to describe the landscape. Such minimalist techniques work well in the novel when one considers that the post-apocalyptic world of the story is either dead or dying; the minimalist shearing of language, punctuation and dialogue closely parallels the sheared world in which the father and son live. This interpretation also explains why the novel was written without definitive chapter breaks or headings.⁷ Furthermore, the short, two-word title of the novel is extremely simple, yet it suggests a myriad of possible meanings and is minimalist in its ambiguity. Does the title metaphorically represent the journey of the two main characters? Does the title simply refer to the actual road on which the father and son travel? Does the road represent a final beacon of hope as it leads south towards the coast? Also common to minimalist works, the ambiguous act which destroys the world in which the boy and father live takes place shortly before the novel begins. The catastrophic event is mentioned just a single time, and not until the novel is well underway: “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (52). This simple, two sentence description seems to suggest that a war, including nuclear bombs, likely caused the apocalypse. Because nothing more is mentioned about the incident, however, a careless reader might miss this vital detail altogether. Considering that McCarthy has continued to reinvent himself as a writer throughout his career, it is quite possible that McCarthy’s next novel or play will

⁷ Frye argues that the direct narrative line used by McCarthy in the novel brings a “dream-like” quality to the work. For detailed analysis, see *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* 171-172.

break from the minimalist mold used by McCarthy in his latest works. Only time and McCarthy's next novel will tell if McCarthy will choose to leave minimalism behind for now, or perhaps even forever. What will never change, however, is the fact that McCarthy has proven through his latest works and even a Pulitzer Prize for fiction that minimalism can be an effective form of writing.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

This study on contemporary American minimalism attempts to compare and contrast how Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel and Cormac McCarthy use minimalist techniques in their stories to create unique structural and contextual patterns that readers can recognize and understand. My primary aim was to show not only how the minimalist writing techniques employed by these four writers can both influence interpretation and heighten a reader's understanding of a story, but also to examine works that I consider to be either "new" or underrepresented in current discussions of minimalism in American literature.

There are many gifted writers of contemporary minimalist fiction such as Mary Robison, Tobias Wolff and Elizabeth Tallent. Of the many minimalist stories and writers that I could have written about, I chose to focus primarily on the works of Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel and Cormac McCarthy. In my opinion, Hemingway, Carver, and McCarthy are amongst the greatest writers of their particular eras. For this reason, and also because all three of these writers effectively use minimalist techniques in their works, I chose to primarily examine works by these writers in this study. Few readers would argue with the claim that Hemingway and Carver are highly minimalist authors, but for most of his career, McCarthy has not been known as a minimalist writer. To successfully examine and position McCarthy as a "new" minimalist writer, and also because McCarthy's minimalist novel *The Road* received the Pulitzer Prize

for fiction in 2007, I devote two chapters of this study to McCarthy. My decision to include a chapter on short story writer Amy Hempel is perhaps less apparent, but, in my opinion, Amy Hempel is the most complex and greatest living writer of minimalist fiction. Most of Hempel's stories are extremely short, yet they all demand a high level of reader participation. Because one of the goals of this study is to bring "newer" or lesser discussed works into the current minimalist discussion, I focus primarily on "What Were The White Things?" and "The Annex," two stories from Hempel's most recent collections.

The greatest challenge in writing about minimalist works, especially when discussing the effectiveness of minimalist techniques, is the fact that "minimalism" is an arbitrary term.¹ There is no written rule regarding specific techniques of minimalism that must be included in a text before a work can be classified as minimalist, or even a set number of necessary minimalist characteristics needed in a story for critics to classify a work as a minimalist text. Therefore, the importance of certain minimalist characteristics varies from critic to critic. With these limitations in mind, I begin by presenting a list of what I consider to be the most important characteristics of contemporary minimalist fiction. Many of the stories examined in this study can be classified as "new" or lesser-known minimalist works, but all of the chosen stories include a minimum of three minimalist markers. For instance, Amy Hempel's relatively unknown story "The Annex" can be be classified as a minimalist text in accordance to my

¹ Kim Herzinger argues that "minimalism" is a "bad" term when he states, "The point is that 'minimalism' is not a good term. It is not a useful term. We would like to get rid of it, to replace it with something appropriately descriptive, something not derived from painting nor sculpture nor architecture nor music. It has shown itself to be, at best, misleading, and at worst devaluative" (9).

definition for a number of reasons: the story is related in first person, present tense narration; the act which results in the woman's anger occurs sometime before the beginning of the story; and the conclusion is highly ambiguous and open-ended, as readers are never told why the narrator is angry with the woman who visits the cemetery on a daily basis.

In analyzing both how and why writers use select minimalist techniques in their stories, I show that the four writers examined in this study employ many of the same characteristics of minimalism in their works. This ultimately suggests that the minimalist techniques of heavy dialogue sans exposition, heavy repetition, and various types of ambiguity are amongst the most important minimalist elements currently in use by contemporary minimalist writers. For instance, both Hemingway in "Big Two-Hearted River" and *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Hempel in "The Annex" use the minimalist technique of repetition, including the repetition of words and phrases, as well as the repetition of ideas and themes, to highlight important information. Carver, in "So Much Water So Close to Home" and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," and McCarthy, in *The Crossing*, present minimalist versions of the unreliable narrator with the primarily intent to create ambiguity. This particular technique invites readers to participate in the story in a unique way, as the possibility that the narrator, or even a group of narrators may be unreliable, causes readers to question the information related in a text. As I show in this study, the minimalist technique of including heavy dialogue with little to no exposition is used in multiple stories by all four writers, but most notably in Hemingway's short stories

like “Hills Like White Elephants” and “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and in McCarthy’s latest works, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*. These and many of the other minimalist characteristics listed in the Introductory chapter represent the current minimalist trend, as such characteristics have been used in the recent past by important writers such as Hemingway and Carver, and are currently in use by Hempel, McCarthy and other minimalist authors.

There is still a need for further study with respect to literary minimalism. In recent years, the female perspective has increasingly become a crucial part of the minimalist formula. As listed in the Introduction, seven of the twelve authors most commonly named as important minimalists, are female.² Many of Amy Hempel’s stories are narrated in the first person, by middle-aged, female characters struggling to cope with emotional challenges related to illness, natural catastrophes, and often, the death of a loved one. Naturally, because most of Hempel’s stories are narrated by female characters, Hempel’s perspective is largely a feminine one. In stark contrast to Hempel’s stories, women play minor roles in McCarthy’s male-dominated works; in both *No Country For Old Men* and *The Road*, the primary female characters are either murdered or commit suicide. Survival, more than anything else, seems to be the primary theme in McCarthy’s latest minimalist novels. I would position Hemingway and Carver more in the middle of the gender spectrum, as they regularly employ both male and female narrators in their stories. In many of the minimalist stories written by these two authors, alcoholism and marital problems which often result in separation or

² Scholarly lists of important minimalist authors often include the following female writers: Alice Adams, Ann Beattie, Amy Hempel, Bobbie Ann Mason, Grace Paley, Mary Robison and Elizabeth Tallent.

divorce, are dominant themes. The gender issues briefly mentioned here are outside the scope of this project, but further research, especially with regards to the works of other female minimalist authors is certainly warranted, so questions concerning the roles that gender plays in minimalist works can be fully addressed.

Another interesting question not directly addressed in this study relates to the popular notion that minimalist stories are often set in safe and familiar domestic places such as living rooms, kitchens or bedrooms. I agree that the settings of most of the minimalist stories written by the writers examined in this study are domestic, but as is proven in each story, while the domestic situations often occur in familiar places, they are far from “safe.” For instance, Hemingway’s “A Canary for One” is innocently set on a train headed for Paris, but once the conversation turns to marriage, and ultimately culminates with the final line in the story, it becomes clear to readers that the young couple is headed to Paris with plans to separate. A large majority of Carver’s stories are set in familiar spaces, yet the occupants themselves are often placed in precarious, even violent situations, as more often than not, the characters struggle to keep their familial relationships together while losing serious battles with substance abuse. In contrast, in McCarthy’s *The Road*, the relationship between the father and son couldn’t be stronger, yet the son fears nothing more than when he and his father are forced to enter “homes” to find food or shelter. These examples, along with the other minimalist stories which are examined in this study, seem to counter the popular claim that minimalist writers use familiar, domestic spaces in

order to make readers comfortable, and, therefore, more apt to participate in the story-telling process. Further research would likely suggest that domestic spaces and situations are actually used by minimalist writers to show that in actuality, such spaces cannot be trusted, as they generally do little more than house various forms of dislocated relationships and invite pain more than pleasure.

As early as 1990, just two short years after the death of Raymond Carver, opponents of minimalism began announcing the death of the literary trend.³ Seventeen years later, in a review of McCarthy's *The Road* titled, "Getting to the End," critic James Wood writes, "In some ways, and despite Cormac McCarthy's reputation as an ornate stylist, *The Road* represents both the logical terminus, and a kind of ultimate triumph, of the American minimalism that became well-known in the 1980s under the banner of "dirty realism" ("Getting to the End" par. 3). I applaud Wood's boldness in stating that *The Road* represents a fitting end, or "a kind of ultimate triumph" of "American minimalism," but as I have attempted to show throughout this study, it is much too early to crown *The Road* as the final chapter of contemporary minimalism. Predicting the future of minimalism will always be an arbitrary endeavor, but considering how readers and scholars are currently embracing the minimalist techniques used by McCarthy, Hempel and other great writers, the future of minimalist literature appears to be bright. After all, a Pulitzer Prize winning novel consisting of striking minimalist techniques will certainly entice other talented writers to try their hand at minimalism. Hempel,

³ For a scathing, book-length work that embraces what Aldridge suggests is the death of minimalism, see *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction*.

Robison, Palaniuk, Beattie, McCarthy, or some yet unknown author might just be writing the next great minimalist story this very moment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

- Abrams, Linsey. "A Maximalist Novelist Looks at Some Minimalist Fiction." *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (Winter 1985): 24-29. Print.
- Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg Ohio*. 1919. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996. Print.
- Arnold, Edwin. "The Mosaic of McCarthy's Fiction [reprinted]." *Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002: 45-51. Print.
- Baker, Carlos. "The Boy and the Lions." *Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999: 7-12. Print.
- . *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*. 4th ed. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1973. Print.
- Baker, Sheridan. "Hemingway's Two Hearted River." *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review* 65 (Winter 1959): 142-149. Print.
- Barth, John. "A Few Words About Minimalism." *New York Times* 28 Dec. 1986, sec. 7:1. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *Modern Critical Interpretations: Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999. Print.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983. Print.
- Brenner, Gerry. "A Not-So-Strange Old Man: *The Old Man and the Sea*." *Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999: 141-151. Print.
- Carver, Raymond. *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*. Santa Barbara: Capra, 1983. Print.
- . *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. Print.
- Clarke, Graham. "Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence." *The New American Writing: Essays on American Literature Since 1970*. Ed. Graham Clarke. London: Vision, 1990: 99-122. Print.

- Dunn, Robert. "After Minimalism." *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (Winter 1985): 52-56. Print.
- Faulkner, William. "Barn Burning." 1939. *An Introduction to Fiction*. X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. 10th ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2007. 160-172. Print.
- . Rev. of Winesburg, Ohio. *Dallas Morning News* 26 April 1925, Part 3: 7. Print.
- Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2009. Print.
- Hallett, Cynthia Whitney. *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen P, 2000. Print.
- Hemingway, Ernest. "Big Two-Hearted River: Part I." 1953. *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966: 209-218. Print.
- . *Death in the Afternoon*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932. Print.
- . "Hills Like White Elephants." 1927. *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953: 273-278. Print.
- . *The Old Man and the Sea*. 1951. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1995. Print.
- Hempel, Amy. *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel*. New York: Scribner, 2006. Print.
- Herzinger, Kim A. "Introduction: On the New Fiction." *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (Winter 1985): 7-22. Print.
- Holloway, David. "Modernism, Nature, and Utopia: Another Look at 'Optical Democracy' in Cormac McCarthy's Western Quartet." *Southern Quarterly* 38.3 (Spring 2000): 186-205. Print.
- "Interview with Cormac McCarthy." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. ABC. Chicago, July 8, 2008. Television.

- Johnson, Tom. *The Voice of New Music: New York City 1972-1982—A Collection of Articles Originally Published by the Village Voice*. Eindhoven: Het Apollohuis, 1989. Print.
- Joselit, David. *American Art Since 1945*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2003. Print.
- Lamb, Robert Paul. "Hemingway and the Creation of Twentieth-Century Dialogue." *Twentieth Century Literature* 42.4 (Winter 96): 453-480. Print.
- Leypoldt, Günter. "Reconsidering Raymond Carver's 'Development': The Revisions of 'So Much Water so Close to Home.'" *Contemporary Literature* 43.2 (Summer, 2002): 317-341. Print.
- LeWitt, Sol. "Seral Project No. 1 (A, B, C, D)." London: Saatchi Collection, 1966: 373. Print.
- Luce, Dianne C. "Beyond the Border: Cormac McCarthy in the New Millennium." *The Cormac McCarthy Society Journal* 6 (2008): 6-12. Print.
- . "Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*: Dialogue of Life and Death: A Review of the Chicago Production. *The Cormac McCarthy Society Journal* 6 (2008): 13-21. Print.
- McCaffery, Larry and Sinda Gregory. "An Interview with Raymond Carver." *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (Winter 1985): 62-82. Print.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *All The Pretty Horses*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. Print.
- . *The Crossing*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. Print.
- . *No Country for Old Men*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.
- . *The Orchard Keeper*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Print.
- . *Outer Dark*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Print.
- . *The Road*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006. Print.
- . *The Sunset Limited*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006. Print.
- . *Suttree*. New York: Vintage Books, 1986. Print.

- Meyer, Adam. "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism." *Critique* 30 (Summer 1989): 239-251. Print.
- Moody, Rick. "On Amy Hempel." *The Collected Works of Amy Hempel*. New York: Scribner, 2006: xi-xix. Print.
- Motte, Warren. *Small Worlds: Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999. Print.
- Palahniuk, Chuck. "She Breaks Your Heart." *L.A. Weekly*. 18 Sept. 2002. Web. Nov. 2008.
- Phillips, Dana. "History and the Ugly Facts of *Blood Meridian*." *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*. Edited by James. D. Lilley. U of New Mexico P, 2002: 17-46. Print.
- Rankin, Paul. "Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*." *Explicator* 49.4 (1991): 238-40. Print.
- Rosenblum, Robert. *On Modern American Art: Selected Essays by Robert Rosenblum*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999. Print.
- Sapp, Jo. "Interview with Amy Hempel." *Missouri Review* 16.1 (1993): 75-95. Print.
- Schwartz, Delmore. *Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999. Print.
- Simpson, Mona. "The Art of Fiction LXXVI: [Interview with] Raymond Carver." *Paris Review* 88 (1983): 193-221. Print.
- Smiley, P. "Gender-linked Miscommunication in 'Hills Like White Elephants.'" *Hemingway Review* 8.1 (Fall 1988): 2-12. Print.
- Smith, Paul. *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co. 1989. Print.
- Sodowsky, Roland. "The Minimalist Short Story: Its Definition, Writers, and (Small) Heyday." *Studies in Short Fiction* 33 (1996): 529-540. Print.
- Timms, David. "Contrasts in Form: Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and Faulkner's *The Bear*." *Modern Critical Interpretations: Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999: 153-164. Print.

- Tyburski, Susan. J. "‘The lingering scent of divinity’ in *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Society Journal* 6 (2008): 121-128. Print.
- Weeks, Lewis E. "Hemingway Hills: Symbolism in ‘Hills Like White Elephants.’" *Studies in Short Fiction* 17.1 (Winter 1980): 75-77. Print.
- Wells, Elizabeth J. "A Statistical Analysis of the Prose Style of Ernest Hemingway: ‘Big Two-Hearted River.’" *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: Critical Essays*. Duke UP, 1975: 129-135. Print.
- Wood, James. "Getting to the End" [Review of *The Road*]. *The New Republic Online*. 17 May 2007. Web. Jan. 2009.
- . "The Sanguinary Sublime of Cormac McCarthy." *The New Yorker*. 25 July 2005. Web. May 2009.
- Woodson, Linda Townley. "De los herejes y huérfanos: The sound and sense of Cormac McCarthy’s border fiction." *Myth, legend, dust: Critical responses to Cormac McCarthy*. Edited by Rick Wallach. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000: 201-208. Print.
- . "Mapping *The Road* in Post-Postmodernism." *The Cormac McCarthy Society Journal* 6 (2008): 87-97. Print.

Works Consulted

- Aldridge, John W. *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction*. New York: Scribner’s, 1992. Print.
- Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Carver, Raymond. *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976. Print.
- Frye, Steven. "Yeats’ ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ and McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*: Art and Artifice in the New Novel." *The Cormac McCarthy Society Journal* 5 (2005): 14-20. Print.
- Hashmi, Nilofer. "‘Hills Like White Elephants’: The Jilting of Jig." *The Hemingway Review* 23.1 (Fall 2003): 72-83. Print.

Jarrett, Robert L. *The Rhetoric of McCarthy's Fiction: Style, Visionary Landscapes, and Parables*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997. Print.

Kirn, Walter. "No Country for Old Men: Texas Noir." *New York Times Book Review* 24 July, 2005. Web. May 2009.

Mars-Jones, Adam. "Life After Armageddon." *The Observer* 26 Nov. 2006: 27. Print.

Ness, Patrick. "Choreography for Canines." *The Guardian* 22 Mar. 2008. Web. Jan. 2009.

Stull, William L. "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver." *Philological Quarterly* 64 (1985): 1-15. Print.