

Same Author, Same Stories, Different Unity: A Close Comparative Reading of a Selection of Stories from Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and *Beginners*

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Abstract

This essay provides a close comparative reading of three stories from Raymond Carver's short story cycles *Beginners* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. A working definition of short story cycles is developed and referenced in the evaluations of these stories—this definition utilizes literary scholar Gerald Lynch's work on the sub-genre. The close comparative analyses of "Why Don't You Dance?", "One More Thing", and "Gazebo" reveal that both collections meet the criteria of short story cycles, however, *Beginners* has a stronger unity that achieved through its shared themes. This supports the argument that Carver's editor, Gordon Lish, exchanged Carver's unity of theme in *Beginners* for a weaker unity of style in *What We Talk About*.

I. Carver and Lish

The literary discourse surrounding the relationship between Raymond Carver, and his editor, Gordon Lish, flourishes as scholars and critics continue to discover more about the extent of Lish's editorial influence on Carver's work. When Carver's short story collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*¹ (*WWTA*), was published in 1981, the magnitude of Lish's editing was largely unknown. Since its publication, both Carver and Lish have preserved their manuscripts and papers at different university libraries, and Carver's original *WWTA* manuscript has been published as a separate collection called *Beginners*². This has provided an opportunity for the public to see what was going on behind the scenes in the creation of *WWTA*, while also raising questions regarding how Lish's edits changed the stories and the collection as a whole. Although Carver is still associated with the minimalist literary genre, some scholars argue that Lish's edits are what created Carver's minimalist identification; among these scholars, a portion of them claim that Lish's edits created unity and cohesion amongst the stories.

The degree of unity and interconnectedness among short stories within a collection distinguishes short story *cycles* from short story sequences and collections. In his article "Short Story Cycles: Between the Novel and the Story Collection," literary scholar Gerald Lynch emphasizes the relationship between the parts and the whole in short story cycles. I will be applying a modified version of Lynch's short story cycle definition to my evaluation of *Beginners* and *WWTA*. This will inform my response to critics Randolph Runyon and Enrico Monti—and to

¹ Originally published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.—a division of Penguin Random House—however, I will be referencing the June 1989 Vintage Books Edition.

² Originally published by The Library of America, New York, in 2009, however, I will be referencing the September 2015, First Vintage Contemporaries Edition.

a lesser degree, Michael Hemmingson—who argue that Lish’s revisions made *What We Talk About* a cohesive cycle. Part of this argument that Runyon, Monti, and Hemmingson are making is that Lish is also responsible for the minimalism in *WWTA*. Other scholars—such as Wells Addington, William L. Stull, and Maureen P. Carroll—provide a more neutral evaluations of Lish’s minimalism and the impact he had on Carver’s work³.

While I agree that Lish is responsible for *WWTA*’s minimalist style, and that the stories in *WWTA* are unified by this style, I disagree that Lish is responsible for creating *the* cycle’s unity in Carver’s original work. This is not to say that the changes made by Lish did not create *any* unity—because they did. Rather, I am arguing that Carver created unity and cohesion *before* Lish’s edits, which is apparent upon examining *Beginners*. Through a close comparative reading of three stories in *WWTA* and *Beginners*, I will demonstrate how, by way of differing unifying principles, both publications meet Lynch’s criteria for being a short story cycle. This will support my defense against the pre-existing scholarly discussion, which claims that Lish is responsible for *WWTA*’s unity and identification as a short story *cycle*.

II. Lynch’s Cycle

I will be using Lynch’s work as the foundation for my working definition of short story cycles. As mentioned before, a cycle differs from sequences and collections as the term “cycle” best captures the “dynamic spiralling movement” (Lynch 517) that is created through the ongoing development throughout the individual stories. Although each individual story in a cycle can be understood when read on its own, when read together these stories create their “strongest coherence... [through] a unified cyclical structure” (Lynch 519). Lynch also emphasizes the necessary functions of the first and last stories in a cycle. The opening story introduces what is essential to the cycle’s meaning and prepares readers for what they can expect from the rest of the cycle (Lynch 524). The concluding story, according to Lynch, “bring[s] to fulfilment the preceding recurrent patterns... and [restates] the cycle’s main thematic interests” (Lynch 525). Lynch notes that the concluding story may also include a call back to characters and images from earlier stories.

It is important to acknowledge that Lynch argues that short story cycles are most strongly unified when this unity is achieved through a shared setting or character(s) (Lynch 519). I argue that a cycle unified by theme is stronger than a cycle unified by style; however, according to Lynch, both of these unifying elements are weaker in comparison to setting and character. Lynch excludes theme and style from his definition to avoid the definition becoming too broad/all encompassing⁴; however, my working definition will include cycles that are unified through theme and style, as both *Beginners* and *WWTA* are effective examples of this. Not only will my comparative analysis of *Beginners* and *WWTA* show how the two cycles are unified in different ways, but it will also provide an example of how cycles unified by theme are more cohesive than cycles unified through style/aesthetic.

³ Stull and Carroll discuss this in their essay “The Critical Reception of the Works of Raymond Carver” and Addington in his essay “Will You Please Be Edited, Please?”.

⁴ When establishing the parameters of his definition, Lynch states that the success of a cycle should be evaluated “on the extent to which it is unified by place or character” and not on its aesthetic (Lynch 522).

By following along with Lynch's definition, I have outlined a working definition of what a short story cycle is in four parts. Short story cycles are: (1) stories that build upon each other and develop the unifying elements of the cycles; (2) stories that can be read and understood independently from the cycle, but are stronger and more unified when read within the context of the other stories in the cycle; (3) stories that are unified through characters, setting, themes, and/or style; and (4), an opening story which establishes the unifying principles of the cycle and a concluding story which reflects on the cycle's unifying elements, and may return to images and themes from earlier stories in the cycle. This is the definition of a short story cycle that I will be applying and referencing in my evaluations of *WWTA* and *Beginners*.

III. An Analysis of *WWTA* and *Beginners*

In the upcoming section I am going to engage in a comparative close reading of three stories from *WWTA* and *Beginners*—the opening story, “Why Don't You Dance?”, the concluding story, “One More Thing”, and a third story, “Gazebo”. I have included “Gazebo” in my analysis as it a proficient example of Lish cutting moments when characters realize and come to terms with their failed relationship(s). In *Beginners*, “One More Thing” returns to many of the themes from “Gazebo”, while echoing themes from “Why Don't You Dance?”; whereas in *WWTA*, these three stories are predominantly unified by their minimalist style and ambiguous endings.

In order to unify Carver's stories through a minimalist style, Lish had to cut out many details that Carver had originally included. Runyon asserts that Lish intended “to create unified collections... by making slight changes and adding small details that would increase these internal connections” (Runyon 159). Runyon notes that this came at the “expense of reducing the emotional charge of the individual stories.” I intend to disprove Runyon's assertion by showing that although the minimalist style curated by Lish weakened the emotional charge and significance of the text's relationships, it did not increase the internal connections between the stories. Instead, Lish removed the internal connections Carver created that unified the stories through shared themes and replaced them with a weaker internal connection: style.

“Why Don't You Dance?” is the *least*⁵ edited story in *WWTA*, with Lish cutting the manuscript by 9% (*Beginners* 217). This story takes place on Max's front lawn where he is holding a massive yard sale. A young couple approach Max to buy some of his belongings and end up joining him in some drinks as they listen to his records. It is not specified in either version of the story how long the couple has been together or why Max is selling all of his belongings. The differences between the two versions of the story may seem minute; however, a pattern discovered by analyzing the other stories is actually present in this text. In the *WWTA* version of “Why Don't You Dance?”, both the sentences and paragraphs are significantly shorter, and the couple remain unnamed and are only referred to as “the boy” and “the girl”. In *WWTA*, the opening story establishes the minimalist style that readers can expect from the other sixteen stories.

These stylistic changes are enhanced by Lish's removal of the insight into the characters' inner thoughts and feelings. This resulted in stories that were “icy at times” (Monti 63), as Lish removed all sentimentality and introspection, thus leaving behind characters who

⁵ This is not including “Mine” (titled “Popular Mechanics” in *WWTA*), which is the only story from the cycle that did not have a typescript preserved in the *Beginners* manuscript (*Beginners* 220).

are less empathetic and creating readers who are less empathetic and connected to these characters. In *WWTA*, “Why Don’t You Dance?” concludes with “the girl” telling someone—presumably a friend—about the items she and her boyfriend got from Max. She comes off quite harsh as she describes the records as “crappy”, the items from Max as “shit”, and Max himself as “the old guy” (*WWTA* 10)—these are words that Lish added to Carver’s text. The ending in *Beginners*, however, is very different. After pointing out the records (which she describes as being *old* rather than crappy), she describes how she and Jack (her boyfriend) fell asleep in Max’s bed, and how Max put a blanket over them, which she has now (*Beginners* 8).

Both versions of the story end with the girl trying to “talk it out” (*WWTA* 10)—implying that there is something deeper to the story that she—and perhaps Carver—is trying to suggest. In the *Beginners* version, Carver notes that she “couldn’t get it into words.” However, this line was cut by Lish. This struggle to put feelings into words is reflected in many of the other stories, which I will discuss later.

Throughout the story, the girl tries to connect with Jack in an intimate manner, as she asks him to kiss her several times. In *Beginners*, Jack has “to prize her fingers loose” (*Beginners* 4). Later, the girl asks Max to dance, as her longing for connection and intimacy is left unsatisfied by her boyfriend. What is not included in *WWTA* is the girl calling for Jack to wake up as she dances with Max, and her observation that she “was filled with an unbearable happiness” (*Beginners* 7) as she held herself to Max. In *Beginners*, the girl craves some level of human connection that her boyfriend is unable to provide; this craving is briefly satisfied when Max lets her hold him. So, what is it that she is unable to put into words at the end of the story?

The ending of *WWTA*’s version of “Why Don’t You Dance?” is an example of the effects of Lish’s omission, which ends stories “on uncertain epistemological grounds” (Addington 10). This is because it is unclear what more there is to the girl’s experience that she is trying to “get talked out” (*WWTA* 10). In *Beginners*, the ending stresses the impact that this day had on the girl, the strength of her desire for connection, and the complex feelings that come up following her dance with Max. Lish’s edits created an opening story that establishes the minimalist style and the unresolved and uncertain endings which unify the stories in the cycle. In *Beginners*, “Why Don’t You Dance?” introduces the themes which unify this version of the cycle—failed relationships, desire for connection/intimacy, and the disillusionment experienced by the characters as they come to terms accepting their new reality.

The themes established in the *Beginners* version of “Why Don’t You Dance?” are revisited in the *Beginners* version of “One More Thing”. In “One More Thing”, Maxine kicks out her violent alcoholic husband, L.D., from their home. The story opens with L.D. arguing with his and Maxine’s fifteen-year-old daughter and ends with him leaving the house. The daughter in “One More Thing” was originally named Bea, however Lish renamed her to Rae in *WWTA*; for simplicity’s sake, I will be referring the daughter as Bea when discussing both versions of the story.

Lish cut Carver’s manuscript of “One More Thing” by 37% (*Beginners* 221), which included the removal of the final paragraph, and created an ambiguous and unresolved conclusion. In *WWTA*, the story ends with L.D.’s final comment before he leaves Maxine and Bea. The story ends as follows: “[L.D.] said, ‘I just want to say one more thing.’ But then he could not think what it could possibly be” (*WWTA* 159). This ending echoes the uncertain

conclusion from “Why Don’t You Dance?”, as the girl tries to “get it talked out” (*WWTA* 10) but eventually stops trying. Due to Lish’s removal of the characters’ thoughts and feelings, there is a lack of resolution to these stories as it no longer seems like the characters are coming to terms with their new realities.

In the *Beginners* version, L.D. follows through with saying one more thing, and ends up saying much more than one thing. L.D. repeatedly tells Maxine and Bea that he loves them, as he struggles to hold onto this moment and to come to terms with the realization that this may be the last time he sees them (*Beginners* 204-205). Be it a consequence of his own actions, L.D.’s life is crumbling before him, he is leaving his family and home, and he is realizing that he must now reconcile with his failed relationships with Maxine and with Bea.

Maxine responds to L.D., asking him if this [their relationship] is what he calls love (*Beginners* 205), shaking her head and making a fist. L.D. cries out her name while Maxine repeats the question. The story ends with L.D. staring into Maxine’s eyes, maintaining the eye contact, and holding onto the moment for as long as he can. The repetition of L.D. stating his love for Maxine and Bea is echoed by Maxine’s repeating of the question; this repetition stresses the importance of this moment for these characters. The failure of L.D.’s relationship with Maxine and Bea is at the forefront of the *Beginners* version. Not only did Lish cut this emotionally charged final scene, but he also cut many of the instances when the characters refer to one another by their familial titles. Lish cut all six of the times that Bea calls L.D. “Dad” (*Beginners* 201-204); although this worked well with Lish’s minimalist style, it weakened the story’s emphasis on the characters relationships and the impact felt by them as they—specifically L.D.—realize that nothing will be the same again. If we look back to the ending of the *Beginners* version of “Why Don’t You Dance?”, there is reason to believe that the girl is having a similar realization to L.D. Both characters are facing the reality that their relationships will never be the same again, and this is something they cannot find the words to describe.

There is a lot of validity to the largely held belief that Lish is responsible for the minimalist style of *WWTA*, as can be seen in Lish’s edits of the previously examined stories (“Why Don’t You Dance?” and “One More Thing”). I agree with Monti’s identification that “what is apparent from Lish’s editing is that he pursued minimalism in a much more profound way than Carver” (Monti 64). This assertion is further supported by Addington and Hemmingson. Addington’s unique approach positions minimalism against realism by comparing the lessons of Carver’s early writing teacher, John Gardner, to Lish’s practices. This supports his thesis that minimalism reflects Lish’s aesthetic more than Carver’s (Addington 1). Hemmingson’s article examines and compares Lish’s editing—or in Hemmingson’s words, “collaboration” (Hemmingson 480)—of Carver’s work with his editing of author Barry Hannah’s work to support his conclusion that Carver would not have been labeled a minimalist, nor would he have found the success he did if it were not for Lish (Hemmingson 495).

Yet, some critics have taken things a step further by claiming that the edits, which were responsible for the minimalism in Carver’s work, were also responsible for the unity and cohesion among the stories. Runyon claims that Lish’s edits changed Carver’s original stories so that “they would create a unified esthetic whole” (Runyon 159). Runyon specifically looks at how the stories were arranged in *WWTA* by attempting to show that neighbouring stories can have a “potentially self-reflexive resonance” (Runyon 160); this occurs when stories in a cycle

echo aspects of neighbouring stories⁶ in the cycle. Runyon neglects to look at the arrangement of the stories in *Beginners*, for if he did, he likely would have noticed that these stories also have a “self-reflexive resonance” with the other stories in the cycle. Although “Gazebo” is not a neighbouring story to the other two I have already looked at, it does reflect and emphasize some of the themes from “Why Don’t You Dance?” and “One More Thing” (as well as other stories from *Beginners*).

Tying It All Together: A Close Reading of “Gazebo”

“Gazebo” is the fourth story in both *WWTA* and *Beginners* and was cut 44% by Lish (*Beginners* 218). “Gazebo” takes place in the motel managed by married couple Duane and Holly. Throughout the story we how their relationship and the hotel are steadily declining as it is revealed that Duane has been cheating on Holly with one of the hotel’s cleaning ladies. As with “One More Thing”, “Why Don’t You Dance?”, and the other stories in *WWTA*, the sentences in “Gazebo” are shorter due to Lish replacing many of Carver’s commas with periods, adding to the cycle’s minimalist style. The changes made by Lish’s edits in “Gazebo” are a prime example of how Lish removed any admission or acknowledgment of responsibility made by the characters. In the *Beginners* version, Holly directly states that she and Duane should break up, saying “Duane, it’s taken a long time to come to this decision, but we have to go our separate ways. It’s over, Duane. We may as well admit it” (*Beginners* 25).

A significant amount of the emotional depth is lost from Lish’s editing of “Gazebo,” as well as some of the background details of the characters (such as how Holly found out about the affair, the duration of the affair, and Holly’s initial response to finding out). Rather than going over these differences as I did with my close comparative readings of “Why Don’t You Dance?” and “One More Thing,” I want to identify the connections between the *Beginners* versions of “Gazebo” and these other two stories. To start, Duane’s inability to connect with Holly and his loss of words regarding their situation is later reflected in L.D.’s inability to express what he wants to say to Maxine and Bea (*Beginners* 26 & 204-205). Both Duane and L.D. have done something that hurt their significant other, and both are facing the consequences of this and struggling with the realization of their new reality. This speechlessness was first introduced by the girl from “Why Don’t You Dance?”, but in all three instances, Lish’s edits either removed or dampened the importance of this aspect of the stories. The only thing Duane can seem to say to Holly is that he loves her. After saying this, he thinks to himself “but I don’t know what else to say or what else I can offer under the circumstances” (*Beginners* 26). Although it is never stated that L.D. is thinking this after he repeatedly tells Maxine and Bea that he loves them, it can be safely assumed that he feels the same as Duane. This assumption is supported by the fact that both men are unable to say anything more than this—that they love their wives/family—and that their words cannot change their recent behaviours. Both men come to realize that no matter how many times they say “I love you” they cannot change their current circumstances. Nothing Duane can say will save his marriage with Holly, just as nothing L.D. can say will make Maxine change her mind.

⁶ Neighbouring stories are the stories that come before and after a story in a cycle; ex. The neighbouring stories of the third story in a cycle would be the second and forth stories.

There is also something interesting about the small moments of rejected or failed physical connection between characters that is missing in *WWTA*. In the *Beginners* version of “Gazebo,” Duane reaches for Holly’s hand, but she pulls away (*Beginners* 25); this can be interpreted as an echo of when the Jack must “prize [the girl’s] fingers loose” (*Beginners* 4) in “Why Don’t You Dance?”. These may seem like minute details, but because they express a similar message which can be discovered in other stories within the cycle, it is reasonable to interpret them as something of significance. These instances of unreciprocated physical connection indicate obvious cracks in these relationships to both readers and the characters within the stories. This foreshadows the ending of these failed relationships, as the characters who are attempting to connect with their partner are coming to terms with the realization that things really are ending (L.D. and Duane), or that their relationship was not what they thought it was (the girl from “Why Don’t You Dance?”).

Looking at other stories in *WWTA* and *Beginners* and comparing these differing versions will continue to reveal that both texts can rightly be called short story cycles. Lish unified Carver’s stories in *WWTA* by stripping away the emotion, depth, and connections between the characters, which created a unity of style and aesthetic. This took away from the stronger unity that Carver had already created through the shared themes of failed relationships, rejected connections, and the disillusionment experienced by some of the characters as they come to terms with their new realities. In *WWTA*, there are many moments which Stull and Carroll describe as “speaking silences,” in which the characters do not say what they are thinking or feeling (Stull and Carroll 39); this reflects the minimalist ideal that less is more. In *Beginners*, however, the characters attempt to fill these silences, but are unable to articulate exactly what they want to say. These characters begin to realize that nothing they say can save their failed relationships, and they are thus faced with the emotional burden of facing this new reality. Rather than saying that Lish *created* a unified cycle out of Carver’s work with *WWTA*, it is more accurate to state that Lish exchanged Carver’s unity of theme for a weaker unity of style that was created through his aggressive edits. Examining these two texts together provides an example of how cycles unified by theme are more cohesive than cycles unified through style/aesthetic.

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