

AMERICAN LITERARY MINIMALISM

by

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(Under the Direction of James Nagel)

ABSTRACT

American Literary Minimalism stands as an important yet misunderstood stylistic movement. It is an extension of aesthetics established by a diverse group of authors active in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that includes Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound. Works within the tradition reflect several qualities: the prose is “spare” and “clean”; important plot details are often omitted or left out; practitioners tend to excise material during the editing process; and stories tend to be about “common people” as opposed to the powerful and aristocratic. While these descriptors and the many others that have been posited over the years are in some ways helpful, the mode remains poorly defined.

The core idea that differentiates American Minimalism from other movements is that prose and poetry should be extremely efficient, allusive, and implicative. The language in this type of fiction tends to be simple and direct. Narrators do not often use ornate adjectives and rarely offer effusive descriptions of scenery or extensive detail about characters’ backgrounds. Because authors tend to use few words, each is invested with a heightened sense of interpretive significance. Allusion and implication by omission are often employed as a means to compensate

for limited exposition, to add depth to stories that on the surface may seem superficial or incomplete.

Despite being scattered among eleven decades, American Minimalists share a common aesthetic. They were not so much enamored with the idea that “less is more” but that it is possible to write compact prose that still achieves depth of setting, characterization, and plot without including long passages of exposition. Like the haiku poets who stand among their influences, they draw attention to their art rather than themselves. In other words, precision and craftsmanship transcend the allure of egoism. Writers working within the tradition did not invent new techniques but rather used a unique combination of storytelling methods to an extreme degree. When successful, their stories and novels evoke an intellectual and emotive richness not readily apparent at first glance.

INDEX WORDS: Minimalism, Dirty Realism, Imagism, Impressionism, Naturalism, Realism, Amy Lowell, Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, Jay McInerney, Susan Minot, Sandra Cisneros, Cormac McCarthy, *In Our Time*, *Can Grande's Castle*, *Cathedral*, *Bright Lights*, *Big City*, *Monkeys*, *Caramelo*, *The Road*

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For Heather

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

American Literary Minimalism stands as an important yet misunderstood stylistic movement. While Cynthia Whitney Hallett, James Dishon McDermott, and John Barth concluded that it began in earnest after 1950, it is an extension of aesthetics established by a diverse group of authors active in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that includes Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound. Hallett, Barth, and others generally agree that works within the tradition reflect several qualities: the prose is “sparse” and “clean”; important plot details are often omitted or left out; practitioners tend to excise material during the editing process; and stories tend to be about “common people” as opposed to the powerful and aristocratic. While these descriptors and the many others that have been posited over the years are in some ways helpful, the mode remains poorly defined.

The core idea that differentiates American Minimalism from other movements is that prose and poetry should be extremely efficient, allusive, and implicative. The language in this type of fiction tends to be simple and direct. Narrators do not often use ornate adjectives and rarely offer effusive descriptions of scenery or extensive detail about characters’ backgrounds. Because authors tend to use few words, each is invested with a heightened sense of interpretive significance. Allusion and implication by omission are often employed as a means to compensate

for limited exposition, to add depth to stories that on the surface may seem superficial or incomplete.

Ernest Hemingway is a dominant figure in American Minimalism because his work consistently reflects the major tenets of the mode. From the brief inter-chapters of *In Our Time* to his late short story “I Guess Everything Reminds You of Something,” Hemingway produced fiction that is efficient, allusive, and implicative. He affirmed many of the principles of his one-time mentor Ezra Pound, stressing the importance of authorial self-effacement and direct treatment of subject. His narrators are non-intrusive in that they tell stories without drawing attention to themselves. In Chapter 16 of *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway wrote that “prose is architecture, not interior design, and the Baroque is over. For a writer to put his own intellectual musings . . . into the mouths of artificially constructed characters which are more remunerative when issued as people in a novel is good economics, perhaps, but does not make literature.”¹ Hemingway was commenting on the monetary benefit of publishing fiction versus collections of less lucrative non-fiction essays, but he was also talking about removing reference to himself. The magnitude of his devotion to craft, the precision with which he approached his technique, cannot be overstated.

While many imitators followed in the decade after his death, it was not until the 1960s that authors such as Raymond Carver began to seriously revisit Hemingway’s important “Iceberg Theory,” an articulation of his method of implication by omission:

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 ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above

water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.²

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with Hemingway's principle is that he conjectured that readers would have a "feeling" about what is missing; the felt absence should not lead to confusion but a desire for further investigation of elements both inside and outside of the text.

Hemingway's Minimalist novel *The Sun Also Rises* is replete with examples of how the "Iceberg Theory" operates. A particularly good instance occurs in Chapter 7 when Jake Barnes, the protagonist-narrator, and Lady Brett Ashley enter a popular Montmartre cabaret in 1920s Paris called Zelli's.³ After dancing for a time, the "nigger drummer" waves "at Brett" and the two engage in a brief exchange:

"Hahre you?"

"Great."

"Thaats good."

He was all teeth and lips.

"He's a great friend of mine," Brett said. "Damn good drummer."⁴

Although this conversation does not seem important, Hemingway implies much. Brett acknowledges that she is friends with the man, and given her sexual promiscuity throughout the novel, Hemingway suggests that they have at one point been romantically involved. The details of the relationship are omitted: Hemingway does not explain how long ago the two were together or the depth of their commitment. In the context of the Iceberg Theory, the conversation represents what resides above the surface, the facts of Brett's relationship part of what lies below. Additionally, there are broader implications given that Brett and the drummer are not of the same race. While Paris was less divided than America in the 1920s, the hint of miscegenation

would have achieved some level of controversy. It is also interesting that Jake does not offer much in the way of an answer or acknowledgement to Brett's revelation. His lack of response to Brett's statement, along with his derisive recollection that the drummer was "all teeth and lips," implies that he either has no interest in the man or that he is silenced by jealousy.

Also part of the submerged portion of the iceberg is the fact that the drummer himself was based on an important figure. The little information Hemingway reveals about him carries considerable significance. In his essay "Who Was That Black Man?: A Note on Eugene Bullard and *The Sun Also Rises*," Frederic J. Svoboda identified the drummer as Eugene Jacques Bullard, a former infantryman and pilot in World War I. He played drums for the Zig Zag Band at Joe Zelli's Jazz Club from 1922 to 1924. Svoboda documents many of the similarities between Jake and Bullard, how each man was in love with a noblewoman and wounded in the Great War.⁵ Like Hemingway, Bullard was a boxer. His injuries were such that he was not able to continue fighting after he was discharged, so he learned to play the drums.⁶ Barnes's attitude is ironic. He refuses to engage with someone with whom he has much in common, perhaps missing an opportunity for a meaningful friendship. Hemingway suggests that rejecting a person on the basis of race can lead to experiential impoverishment.

Soon after Brett's exchange with the drummer, Barnes returns to the theme of miscegenation. The drummer reappears, singing a song as Brett and Jake dance:

"Oh, darling," Brett said, "I'm so miserable."

I had that feeling of going through something that has all happened before. "You were happy a minute ago."

The drummer shouted: "You can't two time--" (70).

As Brett shares her misery with Jake, and he considers the pendulous nature of his romance with her, Hemingway adds another layer of meaning to the scene through an allusion to Ida Cox's "Cherry Pickin' Blues." Although *The Sun* was published in 1926, it was not until 2007 that H. R. Stoneback correctly identified the song.⁷ He mentioned several possible implications and biographical parallels for the number, the fact that both Bullard and Cox were from Georgia and that she completed her major recordings in Chicago, but he did not discuss Cox's lyrics in detail.

The implied narrative in "Cherry Pickin' Blues" parallels the plot of *The Sun*. The speaker is a woman who has been "mistreated" by her lover, likely a white man who has been surreptitiously visiting her. In the first line, she calls him by a name that, perhaps coincidentally, Hemingway preferred as his own nickname: "Come here pretty papa, sit down on your mama's knee."⁸ The song is an airing of grievances; the four words Hemingway quotes in *The Sun* come from the emotional apogee:

You can't slip back to your brownskin, I mean your used to be

I know you're crazy 'bout your cherry pie but you can't two-time me

I've got my trunk all packed and I'm going to leave this town.

On one level, the drummer shouting "you can't two-time--" could be construed as an angry warning to Brett that she needs to be faithful to him or perhaps less promiscuous in general. The central theme in the ballad, however, that disloyalty is emotionally painful, applies equally to Jake and Brett's situation. Throughout the novel, he expresses profound grief over the fact that he cannot consummate his relationship with her because of his wounded genitals. The final line of "Cherry Pickin' Blues" is a crude allusion to what happened to Jake during the war and how his injury has affected his life with Brett: "goodbye little papa, another man has cut your cherry

tree down.” It is remarkable how much depth Hemingway achieves through four seemingly unimportant words.

Minimalist authors select words and allusions carefully; Hemingway was in no sense arbitrary in his decision to quote Cox’s song. Aside from the allusive value of the lyrics, Hemingway’s choice of “Cherry Pickin’s Blues” is noteworthy for other reasons. It is a slow-paced blues tune: Jake and Brett are able to engage in a serious conversation while it is being played because they are slow-dancing. Cox’s recording is also interesting for what it lacks: drums. Only a piano and trumpet accompany her voice. The drummer was likely serving as lead vocalist for the number because he was not required to perform his usual duties.

Even though *The Sun Also Rises* reflects all of the techniques central to Minimalism, Roland Sadowsky, who posited that the movement lasted only from 1975 to 1989, argued that stories within the tradition are usually set in America.⁹ Although it is tempting to generalize about elements such as setting and character demographics, the mode does not reflect a predetermined type of content. Some subjects and themes, however, tend to be more prominent in austere fiction. For example, Jake Barnes’s direct, laconic style of narration coincides with his feelings of isolation and loneliness.

While a sparse, reportorial mode of narration may seem best-suited to shorter forms of verse and prose, Minimalism is not limited to a single genre. Despite the attention given to short stories, the movement includes a broad range of poetry and novels. Imagist poems, for example, often share all of the hallmarks of the tendency, as do the short prose pieces that comprise the inter-chapters of Hemingway’s *In Our Time*. *The Sun Also Rises* is perhaps the quintessential austere novel, and it likely influenced Jay McInerney as he composed *Bright Lights, Big City*. Sandra Cisneros, who is one of the most gifted writers in America, integrates prose-poetic forms

into her lengthy novel *Caramelo*. Many of the authors who write within the mode composed successful verse and prose.

Minimalist fiction often straddles the boundary between prose and poetry, primarily because it is laconic yet highly implicative. Prose-poems, as well as pieces sometimes referred to as “micro-fiction” and “short-short stories,” fit within the category even though they are more condensed than representative tales and novels. Regardless of length, Minimalistic works often achieve a level of profundity generally associated with verse. The reason for this is that both forms necessarily omit relevant information as a means to create a heightened sense of implication. Hallett posited that the style reflects an “aesthetic of exclusion,” which is in a sense true, but it is more accurate to say that it employs an aesthetic of suggestiveness.¹⁰ Many authors communicate important information implicitly rather than explicitly, but few use omission to the same degree as Hemingway, Susan Minot, and others.

Current scholarship on Minimalism generally affirms the centrality of efficiency, allusiveness, and suggestiveness, but also tends to become mired in matters of theme and content. Many authors and scholars have at one time or another discussed American Minimalism, but only a handful have made a serious attempt at defining it. Extant definitions tend to be lengthy lists that reflect a small cross-section of representative works. One of the earliest efforts to describe the mode, and also one of the most convoluted, appeared in Frederick R. Karl’s *American Fictions 1940-1980*:

The two finest examples in modern fiction of minimalism are Camus’s *The Stranger* and Beckett’s trilogy of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. In such works the reader is aware of the spaces between words, the pauses between breath [sic], the silence between noises. Everything is intermittent. The narrative

of these works relies on spurts which barely penetrate as decibels. The author brings us close to boredom, withdrawal, rejection of the work itself. Further, minimalist fiction is nearly always based on a pessimistic view of life, where all the normal goals or controls no longer obtain. It depends heavily on irony, itself a form of negation. In Camus's *The Fall*, depths dominate over heights; narcissism, self-regard, self-indulgence are norms.¹¹

While he argued for the centrality of Camus and Beckett, writers who were unquestionably important to the development of the form in a global sense, the majority of Karl's examination focuses on a series of American authors from the 1960s and 1970s. He implied the importance of efficiency but also suggested that the work tends to be fragmentary and disjointed, which it often is. Pessimism, however, is hardly normative and ultimately irrelevant. Karl also affirmed the tenet that implication by way of omission is an important attribute: "The minimalist writer must assure the audience that he, the writer, knows far more about the subject than he is including; that beyond him, in some spatial realm, there is the rest, undefined perhaps, but there. Often, the writer makes as his point of reference not the line he develops but the beyond; what is not is as dominant as what is, and possibly more significant."¹² While his position tends to be abstract, it should not be dismissed as representing a separate school or different group.

In his introduction to the *Mississippi Review* special issue devoted to Minimalism, Kim Herzinger distanced himself from Karl because he referenced "another, slightly older, group of writers" that included authors such as Joan Didion and Jerzy Kosinski, concluding that "we don't want two rooms with the same number in the House of Fiction."¹³ Herzinger's assertion results from the faulty assumption that he was dealing with something "new," that what Carver and Richard Ford were doing was radically different from the work of Didion and Kosinski. While

their respective subjects and themes may not have been the same, they shared much in common in terms of technique. The critical myopia displayed by Herzinger and others has in part contributed to an ongoing discussion over whether the style is even appropriately named.

The fact that the term “Minimalism” does not encompass a specific type of content has not stifled an ongoing desire to invent a name that somehow addresses subject. Multiple attempts have been made in recent decades to categorize writers in terms of their characters’ demographics, but these efforts have often led to fragmentation rather than clarification. Names such as “Dirty Realism” and “K-Mart Realism” speak to the type of people depicted and matters of plot and tend to include a relatively small number of representative samples. Some authors were unfairly “type-casted,” and this often led to resentment.¹⁴ In considering the corpus of their work, those who had been categorized had a right to protest. Even within their collections, writers such as Carver and Tobias Wolff write about the working-class, college professors, teachers, and a number of people who do not seem to *do* anything. In considering what to call the movement while drafting a letter to various writers and critics requesting feedback for a special issue of *The Mississippi Review*, Herzinger and his cohorts constructed a lengthy list of possibilities that included

Dirty Realism (*Granta*); New Realism; Pop Realism; and our own lovable Neo-Domestic Neo-Realism. Interested parties, before or since, suggested White Trash Fiction; Coke Fiction; “Post-Alcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism” (John Barth); “Around-the house-and-in-the-yard” Fiction (Don DeLillo); Wised Up Realism; TV Fiction; High Tech Fiction; Designer Realism; Extra-Realism; and the svelte Post-Post-Modernism. None seemed to work; they were either prescriptive, baldly inaccurate, aggressively reductive, or blatantly derivative.¹⁵

Herzinger's eventual dismissal of many of these names resulted from the fact that they are narrowly applicable to individual or small groups of writers. Derivations of the term "realism" remain popular, and it is perhaps attributable to the fact that works that fall within the category tend to achieve a high degree of verisimilitude, but again there are noteworthy exceptions. Carver's "Tell the Women We're Going" seems strikingly bizarre, as does his equally violent "Popular Mechanics." In the former, two libidinous, middle-aged married men meet a pair of young ladies on the side of the road. When the men find that their sexual advances have been rejected, they follow the women into a park and one of them kills the girls with a rock. "Popular Mechanics" is an extremely short tale about a couple fighting over a baby. Both begin to pull on the infant, refusing to let go; Carver implies that the child is murdered in the tug-of-war. Tobias Wolff's "Hunters in the Snow" reflects many of the tendencies of the mode, but the plot is as absurd as it is surreal. At one point Tub, the protagonist, sits inside a diner eating four plates of pancakes while his "friend," a man he shot with his rifle, bleeds to death in the bed of a pick-up truck.

Aside from the fact that some Minimalistic works do not achieve verisimilitude, using a derivation of the term "realism" creates a series of other potential conflicts. The period from 1865 to 1918 is viewed by scholars such as Tom Quirk and James Nagel as the era of American Realism and Naturalism. The former denotes fiction that is mimetic, but it also refers to stories that involve characters who find themselves in positions of "ethical crisis."¹⁶ Perhaps the best example of this type of scenario is found in Chapter 31 of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the scene in which Huck makes the existential decision not to turn Jim, a runaway slave, in to the authorities. Few, if any, Minimalist pieces depict moral crises. In other words, narrators either describe experience objectively or, in the case of the first-person

narrative, they often lack the ability to articulate the ethical or social significance of what is happening around them. From a stylistic perspective, the two movements also differ because Realistic works are not necessarily efficient, allusive, or implicative.

With seemingly no consideration for the historical significance of American Realism, the editors of *Granta* elected to title their issue devoted to Minimalism *Dirty Realism: New Writing from America*. They did so in an effort to group seven works by Carver, Ford, Wolff, Jayne Ann Phillips, Elizabeth Tallent, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Frederick Barthelme. In his introduction, Bill Buford offered a useful list of stylistic attributes:

This is a curious, dirty realism about the belly-side of contemporary life, but it is realism so stylized and particularized—so insistently informed by a discomforting and sometimes elusive irony—that it makes the more traditional novels of, say, Updike or Styron seem ornate, even baroque in comparison. Many, like Richard Ford, Raymond Carver, or Frederick Barthelme, write in a flat, “unsurprised” language, pared down to the plainest of plain styles. The sentences are stripped of adornment, [sic] and maintain complete control on the simple objects and events that they ask us to witness: it is what’s not being said—the silences, the elisions, the omissions—that seems to speak most. It is, as Frank Kermode has observed of Raymond Carver in particular, a “fiction so spare in manner that it takes time before one realizes how completely a whole culture and a whole moral condition are being represented by even the most seemingly slight sketch.”¹⁷

Even though the editors at *Granta* elected to use a different title, Buford is talking about American Literary Minimalism. Kermode’s observation speaks to the centrality of implication

and allusiveness to the mode. Buford goes on, however, to make some rather myopic remarks focused primarily on working-class people living economically and spiritually depressed lives:

These are strange stories: unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch day-time television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music. They are waitresses in roadside cafes, cashiers in supermarkets, construction workers, secretaries and unemployed cowboys. They play bingo, eat cheeseburgers, hunt deer and stay in cheap hotels. They drink a lot and are often in trouble: for stealing a car, breaking a window, pick-pocketing a wallet. They are from Kentucky or Alabama or Oregon, but, mainly, they could just about be from anywhere: drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism.¹⁸

Buford's comments have proven both influential and misleading. The attributes he identified do not even describe all of the stories he selected for his own issue: Carver's "The Compartment" is about a father who, during a train-ride through Western Europe, grows angry because the watch he purchased for his son is stolen while he is away from his seat. Buford's list of qualities, however, describes the setting and characterization of some of the works that populate his table of contents but does not adequately apply to works that appeared in the years that followed.

Susan Minot's excellent short-story cycle *Monkeys* shares much in technique with the fiction that appears in the issue, but it is about an upper-middle class family in New England. McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* also fits, but it follows a week in the life of a depressed, club-hopping partier in New York City.

Bright Lights, Big City illustrates Buford's final point, however, because the protagonist does indeed drift "in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern

consumerism,” but these types of references are evidence of the allusiveness common to the style and thus do not support a content-based definition of the mode. In an essay on David Foster Wallace, Sven Birkerts succinctly described the reason for the inclusion of these types of allusions: “These authors [Ann Beattie, Amy Hempel, Frederick Barthelme, and Mary Robison] give us the descriptions of the places, the name brands, the clips of conversation, and we must infer what the innerscape is like.”¹⁹ Authors such as McInerney, Hemingway, and Cisneros do not generally write extended passages that describe the historical and cultural context of their stories.

In Minimalistic fiction, allusions to popular culture help provide details about setting that often play an important role in the development of plot, characterization, and theme, but this is true of many works from other traditions as well. McInerney’s *New York* is a collection of facades and slick surfaces, and his characters are at times defined by whether they capture a certain designer’s “look.” The superficiality of consumerism provides the backdrop for a narrator who seeks to reconnect with the things that give his life meaning, such as family and love. Cisneros employs a similar tactic. In *Caramelo*, advertisements and brand names provide a means to differentiate between American and Mexican culture. When Lala Reyes and her family cross the border into Mexico, she talks about how her senses must adapt to visual and gustatory changes. Buford and others argue that the inclusion of references to K-Mart and Jordache is unique to the mode, but this is not the case. Numerous authors refer to specific places and name brands in their poems, novels, and stories, so it is not ultimately useful to use the practice as a means to separate Minimalist authors from others.

To her credit, Hallett’s definition of Minimalism does not refer specifically to the inclusion of brand names as a central attribute, but her description of the movement is so broad

that its usefulness is negligible. While her positions are laudable for their attention to qualities that can be traced to some of the predecessors of the style, she does not make explicit connections among them:

Collectively, the most identifiable of the varied features of minimalist short fiction include: (1) a blunt, lean, apparently uncomplicated prose; (2) a compact prose that by individual artistic design effects a complex pattern of trope which expands from what first appear to be trivial matters into universal concerns; (3) more dialogue than exposition with no evident auctorial intrusion, and little, if any, narratorial intrusion; (4) non-heroic characters who resemble everyday people doing everyday things; (5) a sense that all “action” either appears to have occurred a while ago, or occurred just moments before the story began, or occurs later “offstage,” that is, not within the moments of the story.

Hallett’s list is something of a hodgepodge of stylistic and content-based qualities. The first and second tenets speak to the importance of efficiency. The third and fourth are specific to American Realism, and it could be argued that the mimetic dialogue often found in austere fiction descends from the work of the local colorists. In *The Realist Short Story of the Powerful Glimpse: Chekhov to Carver*, Kerry McSweeney refers to Hemingway and Carver only as “realists.”²⁰ Hallett’s fifth point could be made about many movements; the same is often true of epic poetry, for example.

Hallett’s last four points are perhaps the most contentious, as some have argued that American Minimalism is nothing more than a resurgence of Naturalism within a Postmodern paradigm. Hallett echoed some of Crane’s thematic interests when she posited that stories within mode examine the “implications of an existential, often absurd, universe in which ‘real’

communication is impossible and action is useless.” She argued that characters are often ineffectual, resigned to the idea that “to protest is to waste one’s breath; to fight is to waste one’s energies.” Her seventh point, however, suggests the influence of postmodern thought. She wrote that through their fiction, Minimalist authors demonstrate a paradoxical “recognition that words are useless, for most things are unsayable.”²¹ This argument seems out of place. By grouping these attributes, Hallett suggested that deterministic forces suppress verbal expression. Naturalistic authors, however, depend upon the efficacy of words because their works are often powerful arguments in favor of social change.

Hallett’s final two observations are exclusive to Minimalism and Naturalism. Characters that populate stories within both movements often succumb to hopelessness because of a pervasive “perception that time passes without resistance” and the feeling that they are helpless members of an “audience rather than . . . participants in their own world and lives” who ultimately conclude that “nothing they do or say can make a difference.” Returning again to ideas prominent in Crane’s fiction, Hallett argued that in the Minimalistic “universe . . . no one thing appears innately unimportant, so all worth is artificially conferred, decided by individual values.”²² Edward Hoagland asserted a connection between Naturalism and Minimalism while, in no uncertain terms, dismissing the latter: “I am tired of minimalist fiction, or ‘dirty realism,’ or whatever term the repetition of Anderson-Farrell-Dreiser-Garland-Crane travels under nowadays.”²³ Hoagland is not entirely wrong: Carver and Bobbie Ann Mason’s characters often seem to lack agency, their tragic outcomes directed by deterministic forces. Russell Banks wrote a rather misguided article entitled “Raymond Carver: Our Stephen Crane” in which he asserted that

the work of both men is powered by the dramatization of a painful argument with a ferocious, inescapable determinism that, when at last it overpowers their characters, approaches tragedy. Crane's determinism is more Darwinian, perhaps, and his argument with it more romantically male and adolescent, than Carver's, in which fate seems locked on to the life-shaping power of the domestic mundane, the mess and grind of ordinary life, and Carver's argument against it is driven by love.²⁴

While some of the philosophical leanings found in Naturalistic works seem to appear in Minimalistic fiction, there is an irreconcilable difference in aesthetic concerns.

The fiction of Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and Steinbeck emphasizes political arguments more than the importance of producing art. In his seminal book *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth American Literature*, Donald Pizer wrote that the "distinction between realism and naturalism, most critics agree, is the particular philosophical orientation of the naturalists. A traditional and widely accepted concept of American naturalism, therefore, is that it is essentially realism infused with a pessimistic determinism."²⁵ On the contrary, American Minimalism is comprised of authors who portray beauty in commonplace objects and actions, who accentuate the aesthetic quality of mundane experiences. Their goal is not to diagnose the cause of a social ill such as poverty or racism and then propose a "cure." Carver said in an interview that he tended to write about people who lived in fear due to financial desperation because he had "known people like" them throughout his life.²⁶ James Dishon McDermott surmised from these comments that Carver was more socially aware than most think.²⁷ Carver's work, however, does not bear this out. Some of the most vociferous critics of the movement have

posited that its primary problem is a lack of didacticism, that it says virtually nothing about how people should live and act.²⁸ The same cannot be said of Naturalistic works.

Minimalism is different from Naturalism and other movements in the sense that it is not a traditional “school.” But Hemingway, Pound, Lowell, Yoné Noguchi, William Carlos Williams, Minot and others shared the same aesthetic concerns, a core idea of what prose should look like; their work is primarily composed of images, presented without commentary or adornment. The style is often categorized as an extension of Postmodernism. Kirk Curnutt posited that it is reflective of the ultimate failure of verbal communication, maintaining that “because minimalism, unlike modernism, was never a movement in the sense that its artists shared a general aesthetic agenda, it has been defined more by its detractors than its practitioners. Yet rather than indulge in anomie, much of its fiction concerns a basic theme: the failure of the spoken word.”²⁹ This view is inconsistent, however, with the stylistic emphasis on precision. A perceived emptiness, whether spiritual or otherwise, does not result from loose diction or syntax. Curnutt did not separate the content of the work from the manner of its execution. In other words, the verbal failure he saw in the work of Carver and others is not a reflection on the nature of language but on authorial choices related to characterization. The Postmodern nihilistic state of being should not be arbitrarily associated with the practice of writing elliptical works. Curnutt’s position seems to be an extension of a common problem: the temporal parameters of American Minimalism are poorly understood.

The stories and novels published in the 1980s were not part of a “new fiction” but represented a continuation of an important, meritorious literary tradition. Chronologically, the first works important to the development of American Minimalism began to appear around 1890. The mode is not as old as the short story itself, the precursors of which date back over six

millennia.³⁰ Barth and Hallet were among the first scholars to attempt a comprehensive history of the movement, but their respective lists of predecessors are excessively broad. Barth's "A Few Words About Minimalism" is a rambling piece, at times playful in tone, in which he lists a series of ancient texts known for brevity as the progenitors of the mode, including

such inherently minimalist genres as oracles (from the Delphic shrine of Apollo to the modern fortune cookie), proverbs, maxims, aphorisms, epigrams, pensées, mottoes, slogans and quips are popular in every human century and culture — especially in oral cultures and subcultures, where mnemonic staying power has high priority — and many specimens of them are self-reflexive or self-demonstrative: minimalism about minimalism.

Barth accomplishes little by randomly naming a variety of brief forms, particularly because he does not discuss patterns of authorial influence. Not until he mentions Edgar Allan Poe does he begin to address the development of the movement in America. He included Poe among the forefathers of the style when he posited that

the genre of the short story, as Poe distinguished it from the traditional tale in his 1842 review of Hawthorne's first collection of stories, is an early manifesto of modern narrative minimalism: "In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency . . . is not to the pre-established design. . . . Undue length is . . . to be avoided." Poe's codification informs such later 19th-century masters of terseness, selectivity and implicitness (as opposed to leisurely once-upon-a-timelessness, luxuriant abundance, explicit and extended analysis) as Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov.³¹

In her description of the origins of the mode, Hallett also included Poe. She does so, however, because of her position on the development of the short story genre:

The seeds of art and 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. . . .³²

Hallett continued on to mention Poe's emphasis upon a "singleness of effect," a feat that can only be achieved if a work is short enough to be read in a single sitting.

Poe is often included among the forefathers of Minimalism for his insistence on the value of brevity, but he was not part of the tradition and his contribution to the category is slight.³³ While he is often portrayed as an integral figure in the development of the short story, at least in terms of producing a theory about the genre, his work does not include many examples of efficient, allusive, and implicative stories. On the contrary, he tends to create verbose narrators who offer much exposition and commentary. The narrator of "The Black Cat" violates virtually all of the tenets of the tendency from the outset:

For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not — and very surely do I not dream. But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified — have tortured — have destroyed me.³⁴

The speaker's claim that he will tell all "without comment" is both absurd and ironic because he is obsessed with his own process, imploring his audience to believe that he does not deserve to die. A comparison of Poe's work with that of a later Minimalist author such as Carver demonstrates few, if any, similarities. The opening paragraph of Carver's "Sacks," like "The Black Cat" a first-person narration, illustrates an acute stylistic contrast:

It's October, a damp day. From my hotel window I can see too much of this
Midwestern city. I can see lights coming in on some of the buildings, smoke from
the tall stacks rising in a thick climb. I wish I didn't have to look.³⁵

In addition to being more direct, Carver's narrator reveals nothing about his purpose. He does not want to intrusively shape the way his listeners interpret what he is about to tell them. Poe's work is in many respects similar to the Victorian novels of writers such as George Eliot, whose narrators often report what happens and then explain to the audience what they should think and feel in response. Eliot's narrator in *Middlemarch* speaks on behalf of all humanity when she proclaims that

we mortals, men and women, devour many a disappointment between breakfast and
dinner-time; keep back the tears and look a little pale about the lips, and in answer to
inquiries say, "Oh, nothing!" Pride helps us; and pride is not a bad thing when it only
urges us to hide our own hurts – not to hurt others.³⁶

In his second review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* for *Graham's Magazine* in 1842, Poe lauded brevity but did not suggest writers exercise it to an extreme degree, nor does he necessarily speak to the style of individual sentences:

We need only here say, upon this topic, that, in almost all classes of composition,
the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance. It is clear,

moreover, that this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting.³⁷

His criticism tends toward reader-response rather than concrete aesthetic rules. His well-known axiom that a reader can only process a work to full “effect” in “one sitting” is, after all, highly subjective.³⁸

Hallett and Barth’s argument that Poe is important to the development of American Minimalism seems more a function of his status as a major figure than the actual brevity of his work. It was not until the turn-of-the-century that fiction became more suggestive and stylistically restrained. Kate Chopin and Hamlin Garland, writers whose fiction was prominent in the 1890s, share more in common stylistically with Hemingway than Poe. Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” features many of the central techniques associated with the tendency, although perhaps not to the same degree.

“The Story” implies much in a relatively small amount of space. Chopin’s prose is not as elliptical as later Minimalist works, however, which is one important reason why it is precursory rather than a part of the category. Chopin was a master of incorporating subtle yet important details into her fiction, and the opening lines of “The Story” illustrate this: “Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death.”³⁹ Mrs. Mallard’s “heart trouble” is both physical and emotional, suggestive of the fact that she has both a potentially fatal condition as well as a tenuous marriage. Her rapturous moments alone in the hour after she has falsely been told that her husband, Brently, is dead suggest that she is a vivacious woman who has essentially felt trapped in life. Her reaction is also interesting, however, in that it reveals much about her financial status, a topic that Chopin does not directly describe. Louise does not worry about how

she will afford food and shelter now that Mr. Mallard is gone; she is a woman of means who can contemplate the “spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own” (354). Despite the power of her ambitions, she soon dies. Brently walks in the front door, giving his unsuspecting wife a fatal shock. The force of her imagination leads to her death, the final words of the tale revealing the irony that those who knew her misperceived the true cause of her demise.

Chopin’s narrator is active, intrusive in the sense that she omnisciently reports the perceptions of individuals and groups as a means to calibrate the ironic tone of the ending. For example, she relates that Brently Mallard’s friend Richards “had only taken the time to assure himself” of Brently’s demise “by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message” (352). Minimalistic stories are often told in a reportorial, self-effacing manner. One reason for their suggestiveness is that they objectively document subjective sensory experiences, requiring a heightened degree of interpretive synthesis. This quality is in part due to the influence of an early movement called Literary Impressionism, a mode that includes Hamlin Garland, Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, Henry James, and Anton Chekhov, among others.

Garland was a student and admirer of the visual Impressionists, invigorated by the vibrant colors he saw on their canvasses. After viewing paintings by European practitioners of the mode at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he articulated his conception of the movement in an essay entitled “Impressionism”:

The fundamental idea of the impressionists, as I understand it, is that a picture should be a unified impression. It should not be a mosaic, but a complete and of course momentary concept of the sense of sight. It should not deal with the

concepts of other senses (as touch), nor with judgments; it should be the stayed and reproduced effect of single section of the world of color upon the eye. It should not be a number of pictures enclosed in one frame, but a single idea impossible of subdivision without loss.

In this passage Garland identified several technical axioms, some of which he later integrated into his fiction. He argued that a work should focus on one object. The image should represent a precise moment in time, and later in his analysis he elaborated on how artists strived to “represent in color an instantaneous effect of light and shade as presented by nature.”⁴⁰ The immediacy he observed in the art was in part due to an emphasis on the present rather than the past.⁴¹ He was less clear in his appreciation of its painterly qualities, describing it paradoxically as not being photorealistic but simple and “exact”; he suggested that while Impressionist painters may have seemed haphazard, they were still methodical craftsmen.⁴²

In his “Chicago Studies,” Garland attempted to translate some of his ideas about visual Impressionism into literature. The brief, imagistic pieces were composed in the 1890s but remained unpublished until they appeared in James B. Stronks’s essay “A Realist Experiments with Impressionism: Hamlin Garland’s ‘Chicago Studies’ ” in 1964. “The City Streets” illustrates how Garland transposed his perceptions of the tradition into fiction:

The red sun struck across the canon-like thoroughfares, gliding the towering buildings standing like granite crags impassive and sullen.

Far down, the street narrowed till it ran like a tunnel under the gray-black tenuous smoke—and was lost to sight.

In this dim light, beneath this cloud of vapor, teams clamored to and fro,
gongs of cars cried out imperiously, angrily, and men rushed back and forth,
traversing the jungle of traffic like adroit and fearless insects.⁴³

In his description of the light of “the red sun,” Garland immediately establishes that he is describing an instant in time, a specific moment in the life of his central object: the city. Both the first and second lines are purely visual, consistent with his observation that Impressionistic art focuses on what is seen. The final image, however, violates this tenet in that it is concurrently auditory and visual: the rapid movement of people moving combines with the harsh sounds of the “jungle of traffic.” The bustling, inexorable metropolitan organism is indifferent to the insect-like people who rush about the streets.

Garland was writing during an era when the promise of technological progress was a source of hope for Americans, but “The City” evokes feelings of mechanistic peril.⁴⁴ The speaker does not, however, didactically communicate this in the manner of the Victorians. Like Chopin, Garland implies much in few words, but he is able to do so with no exposition or narrative intrusion. His images do not in any way “judge” or assess what is being described. This is true of both Minimalistic and Impressionistic writing because both rely heavily upon the suggestive power of individual images.

As Garland’s prose-poem suggests, Minimalism and Literary Impression share much in common. Authors working within the latter tradition sought “to render in literature the sensory nature of human life, to present to the reader the sensations of a character so graphically that the reader would experience the scene directly, participating in the action on the same epistemological plane as the character.”⁴⁵ This approach included an attribute central to both movements: action is reported objectively. Most Impressionistic stories are narrated from a third-

person perspective, relayed according to the subjective “lens” of the protagonist’s perceptions. The author and narrator are thus self-effacing, and the works lack overt didacticism. This reportorial style borrows from the visual counterpart of the mode, seeking to capture sensory experiences in a series of brief moments: “Impressionistic painting represented a single instant of sensory experience; Impressionistic literature also focused on an intense, abbreviated moment of experience, a *Vistazo*, and used such moments as either entire works or as units from which to build a larger artistic construct.”⁴⁶ In a statistical analysis of austere fiction written in the 1970s and 1980s, Sodowsky concluded that “in its most extreme minimalist usage,” narrators “pass on, without comment, objective narrative ‘facts’: present-time action, dialogue, and only the most essential exposition.”⁴⁷ The prose poem, the “short-short story,” the vignette, and many short stories employ a similar technique, and in longer pieces it can sometimes lead to a pervasive sense of fragmentation.

Minimalistic stories often require readers to “assemble” images and allusions in order to make a coherent, complete narrative. In a discussion of the brushwork in Impressionistic paintings, James J. Kirschke wrote that “the comparative absence of articulation forces the viewer to ‘put the painting together’ himself.”⁴⁸ The characterization of protagonists in both traditions reflects the idea that life experiences are disjointed: “Impressionism means instantism. In *Les Nourritures Terrestres* life is reduced to instants. Instants are discontinuous, and life is an instantaneous experience. The self is discontinuous too: each new instant is lived in a new self, not committed to anything, yet always *disponible*.”⁴⁹ Incongruence is in part the reason that austere fiction should be read with the same level of consideration often reserved for poetry. The reportorial nature of the mode is perhaps the reason some critics find it to be nihilistic or morally neutral. Because authors and narrators tend to be self-effacing, intrusiveness and exposition are

rare. Thoughts and emotions are implied rather than told, so there are rarely explanatory passages in which protagonists contemplate what is happening to them.

The fragmentary quality of some Minimalistic works is different from those of Impressionistic stories, however, in that it is not uncommon for authors working in the latter tradition to employ a first-person or even second-person narration. A shift in point of view affects the structure of a work when the narrator's memories and experiences are non-sequential or incomplete. An omniscient third-person narrator, for example, does not black out from drug use or forget important details, all of which happen to the protagonist-narrator in McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*. Donald Barthelme and McInerney sometimes employed second-person perspective, perhaps as a means to directly involve readers in the sensory experiences of their characters. McInerney's city-street sequences vividly illustrate the effect:

It is still raining. Getting a cab is a long shot. Knots of people on every corner wave their arms at the passing traffic. You walk down Seventh to the bus stop, where some twenty souls huddle in the shelter. A bus packed with grim faces goes by and doesn't stop.⁵⁰

The emphasis upon the senses remains, however, because these narrators often lack the ability to articulate their thoughts. In other words, they remain non-intrusive because they cannot comprehend their own feelings and actions to a degree that allows them to communicate a distinct moral or philosophical lesson. The method is different but the ultimate effect is essentially the same.

Imagism is in some ways the poetic equivalent of Impressionism because authors identified with the group crystallized sensory experience into suggestive, highly efficient poems.⁵¹ Because of the kinship in their stylistic programs, Imagism is a part of Minimalism.

The leader of the former, Ezra Pound, was an exacting editor who encouraged fellow writers to move away from excessive prose and abstraction. While the tradition includes a number of writers, its American contingent has proven important to the development of Minimalism. Lowell, Williams, and John Gould Fletcher, among others, preserved the tenets of the mode once Pound moved on to Vorticism. And even though they separated from Pound, who is one of the most dynamic literary figures of the twentieth century, they continued to experiment and expand the stylistic parameters of the movement.

The emphasis on efficiency in American Minimalism is in many ways attributable to Pound, a figure rarely discussed in scholarship on the movement. In his brief essay “Imagisme,” he laid out three important axioms. The first two speak to the importance of avoiding abstraction and writing with precision: “1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.”⁵² Following Pound’s dictate, Minimalist stories are seldom abstract. The material items that appear in them are often invested with intense emotion but carry no symbolic significance. Objects tend to work in concert within a fully developed image, thus they function together as an objective correlative. The emotionally paralyzing sense of “menace” induced by unexpected telephone calls in Carver’s “A Small, Good Thing,” for example, is developed using this technique. Carver said in an interview that he respected Pound’s commitment to cutting any material that was vague or could not be understood.⁵³ He stated that he kept a 3-by-5 index card near his desk on which was written one of Pound’s dictums: “Fundamental accuracy of statement is the ONE sole morality of writing.”⁵⁴ His goal to write with a “fundamental accuracy” is a means to avoid, not engender, Postmodern obfuscation.⁵⁵ In *The ABC of Reading*, Pound reiterated that “good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.”⁵⁶ This suggests a

degree of authorial self-effacement. Pound implied that the author should step out of the way as a means to allow readers to assemble their own interpretation of what has been shown. Pound's editorial work for the young Hemingway is well-documented, but less examined is his influence on Carver.⁵⁷ Given the connection between him and two of the most important figures in the category, Pound's call for directness should be a central element in any definition of the style.

Following the lead of British philosopher T. E. Hulme, Pound fashioned the central axioms of the movement as a rebellion "against the rhetoric and sloppy technique of much nineteenth-century poetry."⁵⁸ J. B. Harmer divided the mode into three stages, describing it as a "succession of small groups. In all there were three: one fostered by T. E. Hulme in 1909; a second led by Ezra Pound from 1912 to 1914; a third organized by Amy Lowell from 1914 to 1917."⁵⁹ The first "version" included poets such as Edward Storer, F. S. Flint, Joseph Campbell, and Hulme.⁶⁰ Pound became involved around 1909 but did not assume leadership until he joined with Flint, H. D., Richard Aldington, Allen Upward, and William Carlos Williams in the second manifestation of the group. Amy Lowell was a late addition to the assemblage in 1914, and her inclusion was in part due to her wealth; Pound and his cohorts needed money in order to publish their work.⁶¹ After Pound's departure, many of the same members stayed on, but John Gould Fletcher and D. H. Lawrence also began to participate. Hulme provided the intellectual basis for the tendency by calling for precision. He argued for control, brevity, and the centrality of the image when he wrote that

each word must be an image seen, not a counter.

That dreadful feeling of cheapness when we contemplate the profusion of words
of modern prose. The true ideal – the little statue in Paris.⁶²

Hulme was arguing not for the miniaturization of thought but of verbal expression. He suggested the importance of the concrete over the abstract, an increased emphasis upon the image. Edmund S. de Chasca said that the Imagists sought to write with a “ ‘hardness’ ” focusing “on concrete objects and small piece of reality which they then visually rendered.” Perhaps more importantly, they emphasized precision and economy.⁶³ The result is poetry that tends to be elliptical yet implicative. While they are self-contained, they also constitute the building blocks of longer Minimalist pieces written in prose.

The Imagist movement changed somewhat when it was left in the hands of Amy Lowell, migrating to the stylistic “borderlands” of prose and poetry. The schism with Pound in 1914, caused primarily by his dislike of Lowell, allowed for increased experimentation. The group became more “democratic”: “the Imagists were to publish quietly as a group of friends with similar tendencies rather than with dogmatic principles.”⁶⁴ Along with Fletcher, Lowell developed an important form of writing they termed “Polyphonic Prose.” Fiction written in this mode is close to the heart of Minimalism because it is written using poetic devices such as internal rhyme and alliteration. Many of Lowell’s finest pieces are synesthetic, focusing upon intense, diverse sensory experiences in an instant of time, much like the work of literary Impressionists. They are image-driven and offer little in the way of exposition or intrusiveness. Lowell was never able to fully abandon some of her Romantic tendencies, one example being her proclivity to become effusive in poems involving natural imagery, but she was a talented storyteller who was able to communicate much in a relatively efficient manner.⁶⁵

The most successful Minimalist-Imagist poems imply an entire narrative. Setting, dialogue, and emotion are condensed and integrated into brief, highly implicative episodes only a

few lines in length. “The Mermaid,” a poem by British writer Allen Upward, illustrates these tendencies:

The sailor boy who leant over the side of the Junk
of Many Pearls, and combed the green tresses of the
sea with his ivory fingers, believing that he had heard
the voice of a mermaid, cast his body down between
the waves.⁶⁶

On its surface, this brief piece seems to lack the basic elements of a story but, as is consistent with the mode, each word is essential. The protagonist is a “sailor boy,” a figure whose name suggests youth and inexperience. His death figuratively alludes to a return to the cradle as he falls into a trough “between the waves.” His first actions imply he is something of a romantic, someone who shirks his maritime duties in order to ponder the beauty of the sea. As in Impressionistic works, the entire piece is objectively reported in sensory detail: the feel of “green tresses of the sea”; the sound of the passing waters and the imagined “voice of a mermaid.” Upward’s poem is strikingly visual, in part because he includes colors such as pearl, green, and ivory. The young sailor’s longings are emotionally intense; every detail the speaker offers suggests loneliness and isolation. Upon hearing only a voice, he sacrifices himself to his ideals. The reportorial nature removes any sentimentality, however, even though the text implies an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and longing. Upward offers no reason or lesson.

Sandra Cisneros’s prose and poetry often carries with it strong political undertones, but she tends to avoid sounding heavy-handed. Her poem “Mariela,” published seventy-three years after the appearance of *Des Imagistes* in 1914, shares many of the same techniques found in

“The Mermaid,” particularly in the way it communicates themes of violence and conveys emotional intensity:

One day you forget his bitter smell
 and one day you forget your shame.
 You remember how your small cry
 rose like a blackbird from the corn,
 when you picked yourself up from the earth
 how the clouds moved on.⁶⁷

The imagery is predicated upon sensory experience. Within a single moment, the speaker suggests that Mariela feels both the ugliness of having been sexually assaulted and a desire to move forward with her life. The voice seems one of experience, belonging to a woman who has perhaps been victimized in the same way. She emits a subtle mixture of resignation, that “these things happen,” as well as personal strength. The final line suggests that the world, specifically nature, responds to no one’s desires or wishes, a theme Crane often incorporated into his work. Perhaps what is most technically remarkable about both pieces is that so much is communicated in only five short lines. While “The Mermaid” displays an apparent Asian influence, “Mariela” also shares much in common with the centuries-old form known as haiku.

American Minimalism does not begin with seventeenth-century Asian poets, but both traditions draw from the same pool of philosophical ideas. Pound was an inventive man with a strong personality, but he was also famous for being a borrower. His 1915 collection *Cathay* is in part a series of poems “translated” from the Chinese, a “collaboration” with Sinologist Ernest Fenellosa and the poet Rihaku.⁶⁸ His most well-known Imagistic poems are in the tradition of haiku. To *Des Imagistes*, the original anthology published by the Imagist school and the only one

to which he gave his blessing, he contributed, among other pieces, “Liu Ch’e” and “Fan Piece for Her Imperial Lord.”⁶⁹ Both feature an imagistic delicacy suggestive of purity and romance.

While he was no doubt influenced by a number of writers, arguably one of the most important is the relatively obscure Yoné Noguchi.

Noguchi was described by scholar Yoshinobu Hakutani as having “played the most vital role in disseminating Japanese poetics and haiku, in particular, to the west.”⁷⁰ He wrote several important books on his homeland’s aesthetic philosophies and was an acquaintance of W. B. Yeats. Pound was acquainted with Noguchi “as early as 1911,” and it is quite possible that he was aware of the latter man’s excellent books about haiku.⁷¹ Noguchi was a bilingual poet whose works had garnered the appreciation of a broad range of British and Irish authors.⁷² Many of the ideas he shared in his books and lectures suggest a continuation of traditions important to both Imagism and American Minimalism. While it is a rather obvious step to compare Pound’s “In A Station of the Metro” and a traditional seventeen-syllable poem, the aesthetic principles that inform each mode are not as apparent. Noguchi played a vital role in “explaining” the verse of his homeland to a receptive Modernist audience. Perhaps the most prominent parallel, one that he wrote about frequently, is the stylistic decision to write implicative and efficient verse. He maintained that

“hokku” (seventeen syllable poem) in Japanese mind might be compared with a tiny star, I dare say, carrying the whole sky at its back. It is like a slightly open door, where you may steal into the realm of poesy. It is simply a guiding lamp. Its value depends on how much it suggests. The Hokku poet’s chief aim is to impress the reader with the high atmosphere in which he is living.⁷³

It is important, however, that this last line does not suggest a need for authorial intrusion. All is subtle and suggestive, the author a meager presence in his text.

The adage “less is more” has been relegated to the realm of cliché, and this is lamentable because it is a succinct phrase that implies a type of self-denial. According to Noguchi, the haiku poet published little as an extension of artistic and spiritual humility. Minimalistic stories and poems operate in much the same way because they are written by authors who want the focus to be on their art and not on the act of writing: omission and brevity force readers into a deeper engagement with what is before them. In *The Pound Era*, Hugh Kenner identified William Carlos Williams’s statement “ ‘no ideas but in things’ ” as “an epistemology (what you can know is in front of you).”⁷⁴ The implication of this axiom is that authorial and narrative intrusion draws emphasis away from the images themselves. Noguchi argued that this principle was a part of his homeland’s aesthetic philosophy when he wrote that “explanation is forbidden in the House of Poesy for Japanese.”⁷⁵ This technique necessitates a limiting of the ego. De Chasca wrote that one of the unifying beliefs of Pound and his cohorts was that “the poet should desist from making running comments in his proper person, that he should avoid being an interpretive presence in the poem.”⁷⁶ Contrary to Postmodern works, Minimalistic fiction is not self-referential; Williams, Carver, Cisneros, and Minot were not composing fiction about the act of composition or wrestling with the nature of genre. Their stories eschew abstraction yet demand imagination.

Haiku, like well-wrought Minimalistic pieces, suggest but do not explicitly offer visual or narrative totality. In his description of the form, Hakutani wrote that “because of their brevity and condensation, haiku seldom provides the picture with detail. The haiku poet delineates only an outline or highly selective parts, and the reader must complete the vision.”⁷⁷ In other words,

they are Impressionistic. The poems are often fragmentary, seemingly composed of objects and images in need of interpretive repositioning. The relationship among the “pieces” is not always clear, but a good haiku should evoke intellectual and spiritual sublimation. Noguchi’s English poetry reflects these attributes, but he tended to write more expanded works that did not fit into one of the many syllabic patterns of traditional haiku.⁷⁸

Noguchi’s work, particularly the pieces that comprise his two-volume collection *The Pilgrimage*, illustrate the movement away from traditional haiku into Imagist poetics. His poem “Tragedy” employs some imagery typical of ancient forms, such as the willow, but evokes a rich imagistic atmosphere:

The shadow of the lonely willow
 Swings
 Ghastly, ghastly;
 The roads are lost
 In the hoary-aired mists of eve;
 A strange green light in the distance
 Drifts
 As a wandering fay;
 I hear a wild cry
 In the dark air,
 In the stream,
 In the stars.⁷⁹

The sense of menace present in the scene grows from sensorial confusion. The only certainty is the tree, but it seems predatory rather than comforting. The vision of the “strange green light in

the distance” and the sound of the “wild cry” combine to enhance the speaker’s sense of fear and hopelessness, but there is little in the way of narrative. Noguchi does not talk about where the protagonist is or why he is there, only that his perceptions are shaped by fear. In this way, “Tragedy” is similar to the eleventh part of Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” in that it is about the way a person’s mental state influences his interpretation of the objects surrounding him.

Stevens was not an Imagist per se, but the fact that “Thirteen Ways” is essentially a collection of haiku speaks to the broad influence Asian poetry asserted on American literature in the early twentieth-century. Mark Helprin’s statement that authors of austere fiction “took their stylistic cue from the haiku” was, given its context, probably meant to be derisive, but that does not mean he was wrong.⁸⁰ On the other hand, traditional haiku is not in itself Minimalistic. One difference is that Japanese poets used a specific set of images, objects, and concepts that were supposed to appear in their poetry. Cherry blossoms, which are frequently mentioned, are distinctly symbolic. Haiku traditionally contain a reference to one of the four seasons.⁸¹ In other words, there were rules that governed content. The same cannot be said of Minimalism.

The brevity and suggestiveness of the haiku and Imagist poem do not have clear analogs in the realm of visual art, but this has not stopped some scholars and critics from positing a connection between literary and sculptural Minimalism. The relationship, however, is tenuous. The “broken” brushwork of an Impressionist painting has more resonance with the style than do the large, industrial shapes welded by artists such as Ronald Bladen and Robert Morris.⁸² Hallett seems generous in her appraisal of any shared attributes, stating that “the similarities between visual and literary minimalism are obvious but perhaps superficial, especially since both involve apparently simple means and forms that prove to be not so simple upon close scrutiny.” Her

conclusion is helpful, however, because she differentiated the sculpture from the literature by saying that the former presents itself as being representative of only itself whereas the latter can employ allusions and tropes as a means to expand interpretive significance.⁸³ Regardless, the connection between the two modes is in name alone.

Although sculptural Minimalism lost momentum at the end of the 1970s, the 1980s were a historically pivotal time in the history of American Literary Minimalism. Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and *Cathedral*, Minot's *Monkeys*, and McInerney's *Bright Lights*, *Big City* and *Ransom* continue the stylistic tradition founded by Noguchi, Pound, Hemingway, and various other literary Impressionists and Imagists. Kosinski and Ford wrote *Steps* and *Rock Springs*, respectively, according the tenets of the form but later returned to a more expansive prose style. Ford's Frank Bascombe novels, one of which, *Independence Day*, won the Pulitzer Prize, are rather tedious. Tobias Wolff's early work, such as his collection *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, is Minimalistic, but the same cannot be said of later works such as *Old School*. It seems that when the mode was at the height of its popularity, perhaps around 1986, the critical reception turned from acclamatory to scornful.

Critics in the 1980s whose tastes were more attuned to avant-garde work printed by smaller presses attempted to make sense of the popularity of brief, elliptical works that appeared with regularity in a variety of magazines and journals.⁸⁴ John W. Aldridge and Carol Ianonne lamented a perceived lack of philosophical and moral direction, suggesting that this "fresh" material was reflective of an empty, nihilistic era in American life.⁸⁵ The mode attracted considerable mass appeal. McInerney's *Bright Lights*, *Big City*, for example, earned instantaneous suspicion after selling over 300,000 copies.⁸⁶ Brief, highly implicative short stories published in periodicals such as *The New Yorker* led to outcries from "Maximalists" such as John

Updike who desired a continuation of a tradition that favored a “fuller” prose style practiced by writers such as Robert Coover, Philip Roth, and J. D. Salinger.⁸⁷

Although it is in many respects difficult to identify a reason, the movement proved a controversial subject during the second half of the 1980s. The ranks of naysayers grew as the decade progressed. In 1987, Jay David Bellamy wrote that

some of the so-called minimalists have sacrificed stylistic richness or sophistication in search of other values. Of course, pure styles can be conceived and delivered in six-word sentences and in fiction that more or less eliminates exposition, as Hemingway sometimes tried to do. But it isn't easy. It isn't the sort of feat everyone should be trying for at once. So, whatever else the newest American fiction might try to do in the years ahead, my hope is that, stylistically and imagistically, it will strive for more robust, more muscular, more ambitious performances—a swing of the pendulum back in the direction of Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor.⁸⁸

Bellamy echoed the sentiments of Updike and the Maximalists, although in a somewhat more ambassadorial manner. T. Coraghessan Boyle's complaint was different in that he thought the tendency was repetitious, contending that

actually, contemporary North American fiction is too much of one thing—the safe, minimalist/realist story purveyed by a group I like to call the “Catatonic Realists.” (You know the story, you've read it a thousand times: Three characters are sitting around the kitchen of a trailer, saying folksy things to one another. Finally one of them gets up to go to the bathroom and the author steps in to end it with a line like, ‘It was all feathers.’)⁸⁹

Boyle's final quip may have been an allusion to a story by Carver called "Feathers," which does indeed involve characters "sitting around." Lee K. Abbott seemed not only opposed to the "new fiction" but infuriated by it. In response to a query from Kim Herzinger of *The Mississippi Review* requesting an opinion about it, Abbott replied that "this is an issue I take seriously enough to fist-fight about."⁹⁰ Although less outwardly aggressive, Carver, who is perhaps the most important Minimalist author from the 1980s, seemed exasperated: " 'Minimalism' vs. 'Maximalism.' Who cares finally what they want to call the stories we write? (And who isn't tired to death by now of that stale debate?)."⁹¹ Carver's irritation over names and titles is perhaps understandable given the many appellations circulating at the time.

Lost in the debate, however, was a sense of history. Garland, Pound, Hemingway, and others who were important to the development of the style seemed to fall subservient to fellow Modernists such as Faulkner. In an absurdly arrogant and censorious gesture, Stephen Koch, Tom Jenks, Madison Smartt Bell, Mary Gaitskill, and Meg Wolitzer gathered at Columbia University for a roundtable discussion of the tradition entitled "Throwing Dirt on the Grave of Minimalism." Bell boldly declared that "what we are doing here is composing the epitaph of this movement described as minimalism, which is now effectively over. I think the fad has ended, it's not likely to be revived at any significant level of intensity."⁹² Fortunately, many talented authors were not invited to the "funeral."

The basic tenets of the style remain intact, and Minimalism continues to show vitality in "micro-fiction" such as Robert Olen Butler's *Severance* and *Intercourse*, novels such as Cisneros's *Caramelo*, Cormac McCarthy's brilliant *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, and recent anthologies of prose poems and "short-short stories" such as *Models of the Universe* and *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*.⁹³ Minimalist fiction has not been

“buried,” and it will not be unless people lose interest in the basic acts of reading and telling stories. It reflects daily experience, artistically mimicking what is for many a common mental activity. A doctor trying to diagnose the reason for his patient’s ailment, or a person reading a newspaper, often engages in the same investigative and imaginative process of synthesizing fragments of information in order to construct a coherent, complete narrative.

Notes

¹ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1932), p. 191.

² Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, p. 192.

³ Frederic Svoboda, "Who Was That Black Man?: A Note on Eugene Bullard and *The Sun Also Rises*," *The Hemingway Review* 17, no. 2 (1998): 105, and H. R. Stoneback, *Reading Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises: Glossary and Commentary* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2007), p. 70.

⁴ Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner, 1926), p. 69. Subsequent references are to the same edition.

⁵ Svoboda, "Who Was That Black Man," pp. 105-07.

⁶ Svoboda, "Who Was That Black Man," p. 8.

⁷ Svoboda incorrectly argued that the song was "Aggravatin' Papa (Don't You Try to Two Time Me)." Stoneback wrote that "Aggravatin' Papa" does not contain the lyrics "you can't two-time," but that they can be found in Ida Cox's "Cherry Pickin' Blues," a song with numerous thematic implications. Stoneback, *Reading Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises*, pp. 108-10.

⁸ Ida Cox, "Cherry Pickin' Blues," *Complete Recorded Works 1923-1938: Volume 2, 1924-1925*, compact disc, Document Records, 1995. Subsequent references are to the same recording.

⁹ Roland Sadowsky, "The Minimalist Short Story: Its Definition, Writers, and (Small) Heyday," *Studies in Short Fiction* 33, no. 4 (1996): 539.

¹⁰ Cynthia Whitney Hallett, "Minimalism and the Short Story," *Studies in Short Fiction* 33 (1996): 487.

¹¹ Frederick Karl, *American Fictions 1940-1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 384.

¹² Karl, *American Fictions*, p. 384.

¹³ Kim A. Herzinger, "Introduction: On the New Fiction," *Mississippi Review* 40-41 (Winter 1985): 8.

¹⁴ See, for example, William L. Stull, "Matters of Life and Death," *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), pp. 184-85, and Richard Ford, "A Symposium On Contemporary American Fiction: Richard Ford," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 2, no. 4 (1987): 730-31.

¹⁵ Herzinger, "Introduction: On the New Fiction," p. 8.

¹⁶ James Nagel, *The Portable American Realism Reader*, ed. James Nagel and Tom Quirk (New York: Penguin, 1987), p. xxv.

¹⁷ Bill Buford, "Dirty Realism: New Writing from America," *Granta* 8 (1983): pp. 4-5.

¹⁸ Buford, "Dirty Realism," p. 4.

¹⁹ Sven Birkerts, "David Foster Wallace," *American Energies: Essays on Fiction* (New York: William Morrow, 1992), pp. 388-89.

²⁰ Kerry McSweeney avoided the term "Minimalist," and he later maintained that the paradigm has shifted to "post-minimalism." *The Realist Short Story of the Powerful Glimpse: Chekhov to Carver* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007), p. 248.

²¹ Cynthia Whitney Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), p. 25.

²² Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver*, p. 25.

²³ Edward Hoagland, “A Symposium On Contemporary American Fiction: Edward Hoagland,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, no. 4 (1987): 745.

²⁴ Russell Banks, “Raymond Carver: Our Stephen Crane,” *The Atlantic* 268, no. 2 (1991): 101.

²⁵ Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 9.

²⁶ Sinda Gregory and Larry McCaffery, “An Interview with Raymond Carver,” *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), pp. 110-11.

²⁷ James Dishon McDermott, *Austere Style in Twentieth-Century Literature: Literary Minimalism* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), pp. 96-97.

²⁸ See John W. Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction* (New York: Scribner’s, 1992), pp. 9, 32-33, 39. Aldridge exhibits a strong degree of “moral outrage,” particularly at “spiritually empty” authors Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis (9). Some of what he wrote seems driven by snobbery: “In the K Mart fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason and Frederick Barthelme—to take two notable instances—the environment typified by the K Mart is not evaluated as the sleazy and soul-deadening thing it is” (39).

²⁹ Kirk Curnutt, *Wise Economies: Brevity and Storytelling in American Short Stories* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1997), p. 246.

³⁰ See James Nagel, *Anthology of the American Short Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), pp. 1-3.

³¹ John Barth, “A Few Words About Minimalism,” *New York Times* (Dec. 28, 1986): 2.

³² Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver*, p. 13.

³³ See Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," *Poe: Poetry, Tales, & Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 1375.

³⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," *Tales & Sketches Volume 2: 1843-1849*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 849.

³⁵ Raymond Carver, "Sacks," *What We Talk About When Talk About Love* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 37.

³⁶ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 62.

³⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, review of *Twice-Told Tales* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Poe: Essays and Reviews* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 571.

³⁸ Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," p. 1375.

³⁹ Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), p. 852. Subsequent references are to the same edition.

⁴⁰ Hamlin Garland, "Impressionism," *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art Dealing Chiefly with Literature Painting and the Drama*, ed. Jane Johnson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 97-98.

⁴¹ Garland, "Impressionism," p. 104.

⁴² Garland, "Impressionism," p. 105.

⁴³ James B. Stronks, "A Realist Experiments with Impressionism: Hamlin Garland's 'Chicago Studies'," *American Literature* 36, no. 1 (March, 1964): 49-50.

⁴⁴ Tom Quirk, "The Historical Context," *The Portable American Realism Reader*, ed. James Nagel and Tom Quirk (New York: Penguin, 1987), pp. vii-ix.

⁴⁵ James Nagel, "Literary Impressionism and *In Our Time*," *The Hemingway Review* 6, no. 2 (1987): 19.

⁴⁶ Nagel, "Literary Impressionism and *In Our Time*," p. 19.

⁴⁷ Sodowsky, "The Minimalist Short Story," p. 535.

⁴⁸ James J. Kirschke, *Henry James and Impressionism* (New York: Whitston, 1981), p. 9.

⁴⁹ Maria Elizabeth Kronegger, *Literary Impressionism* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1973), p. 61.

⁵⁰ Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (New York: Vintage, 1984), pp. 86-87

⁵¹ See Nagel, "Literary Impressionism," pp. 19-20.

⁵² Ezra Pound, "Imagisme," *Ezra Pound: Early Writings, Poems and Prose* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 209-10.

⁵³ Robert Pope and Lisa McElhinny, "Raymond Carver Speaking," *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 22.

⁵⁴ Jim Spencer, "Raymond Carver: No Shortcuts to a Good Story," *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 24.

⁵⁵ The debate over whether Minimalism is Postmodern does not seem to be nearing a conclusion. In what is perhaps the most intriguing argument to date, Zoltán Abádi-Nagy wrote that works within the movement both affirm and reject the paradigm. In other words, the discussion closely mirrors disagreements over content in that it depends on whose stories are used as representative evidence. See Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, "Minimalism vs. Postmodernism In Contemporary Fiction," *Neohelicon* 28, no. 1 (2001): 129-44.

⁵⁶ Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions: 1987), p. 32.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Michael Reynolds, *Hemingway: The Paris Years* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), pp. 22-27, and chapter four of Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

⁵⁸ Edmund S. de Chasca, *John Gould Fletcher and Imagism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), p. 142.

⁵⁹ J. B. Harmer, *Victory in Limbo: Imagism 1908-1917* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), p. 17.

⁶⁰ Harmer, *Victory in Limbo*, p. 22.

⁶¹ Harmer, *Victory in Limbo*, p. 41.

⁶² T. E. Hulme, *Selected Writings*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 38-39.

⁶³ De Chasca, *John Gould Fletcher*, p. 152-53.

⁶⁴ Peter Jones, Introduction, *Imagist Poetry* (New York: Penguin, 2001), p. 22.

⁶⁵ De Chasca, *John Gould Fletcher*, p. 39.

⁶⁶ Allen Upward, "Scented Leaves from a Chinese Jar: The Mermaid," *Des Imagistes* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1914), p. 52.

⁶⁷ Sandra Cisneros, "Mariela," *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 27.

⁶⁸ The title page of the book explains that *Cathay* is "for the most part from the Chinese of Rihaku, from the notes of Ernest Fenollosa, and the decipherings of the professors Mori and Ariga." Ezra Pound, *Cathay* (London: Elkins Matthew, 1915).

⁶⁹ Ezra Pound, “Liu Ch’e,” *Des Imagistes* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1914), p. 44; Pound, “Fan-Piece for Her Imperial Lord,” *Des Imagistes*, p. 45.

⁷⁰ Noguchi lived from 1875 to 1947.

⁷¹ Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Haiku and Modernist Poetics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), pp. 2-3. In his article “Ezra Pound, Yone Noguchi, and Imagism,” Hakutani published a letter from Pound to Noguchi in which the former acknowledged having read *The Pilgrimage*.

⁷² Yoshinobu Hakutani, “Ezra Pound, Yone Noguchi, and Imagism,” *Modern Philology* 90, no. 1 (Aug. 1992): 47.

⁷³ Yoné Noguchi, *The Pilgrimage*, vol. 2 of 2 (Kamakura: The Valley Press, 1909), p. 137.

⁷⁴ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 510.

⁷⁵ Noguchi, *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1914), p. 21

⁷⁶ De Chasca, *John Gould Fletcher*, p. 145.

⁷⁷ Hakutani, *Haiku and Modernist Poetics*, p. 9.

⁷⁸ See Noguchi, *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry*, pp. 92-93 for an explanation of ancient and contemporary usages of syllabic patterns in haiku.

⁷⁹ Noguchi, *The Pilgrimage*, vol. 2 of 2, p. 114.

⁸⁰ Mark Helprin, “Introduction: The Canon Under Siege,” *The Best American Short Stories 1988* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), p. xx.

⁸¹ Hakutani, *Haiku and Modernist Poetics*, p. 9.

⁸² See, for example, Bladen’s “The X” and Morris’s “Untitled, 1967.” Photos of each can be found in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968) pp. 22, 229.

⁸³ Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story*, p. 1.

⁸⁴ For an insightful statistical analysis of Minimalism during the 1980s, see Sodowsky, “The Minimalist Short Story: Its Definition, Writers, and (Small) Heyday,” pp. 529-40. Sodowsky ultimately committed a common error: he chose a narrow sample set. Based on his numbers, he concluded that

Herzinger’s lengthy definition functions fairly well in isolating the stories and authors considered here, with the exception of the terms “hyperrealistic/superrealistic,” which, unless they are meant to apply to the flat, colloquial language—representational language—of most minimalist narrators and characters, I do not find descriptively useful. Minimalist writing is simply representational. If we take note of setting and of the importance of narrative voice in many of the “form” traits named by Herzinger, a somewhat more concise definition is possible: published primarily between 1975 and 1989, most minimalist short stories are set in present-time America; their effaced narrators report action and dialogue, some exposition, and occasionally introspection in the same non-literary language used by their self-focused blue collar or yuppie characters. (539)

His point about most Minimalist stories being set in America is particularly troublesome, even if he had been correct about the time frame. Some of Wolff’s and Carver’s stories, for example, make no mention of town, state, or country. Others, such as Carver’s “The Compartment,” are clearly set outside of the United States. Sodowsky’s final point is most helpful because it suggests the connection between Minimalism and Impressionism.

⁸⁵ Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians*, p. 9. Carol Ianonne wrote what is perhaps one of the most lucid, albeit charged, responses to the backlash against Minimalism, arguing that it in many ways was the end-product of Postmodern critical theory:

In even a casual observer of the recent cultural scene, such remarks are liable to inspire anything from bemusement to incredulity. After years of a Left-inspired literary criticism that attacked the possibility of narrative authority; the possibility of shared moral and cultural values in literature; the possibility of rendering a comprehensive world view in fiction; the possibility of conveying any definitive meaning whatsoever in literary texts; the possibility of even knowing reality itself through language —after all this, now we hear denunciations of “literary passivity,” “moral confusion,” and the “lack of a shared conceptual system.” After years of assaults on literary standards as hierarchical and imperialistic; of assertions that a literary canon supposedly devised by white males could not reflect the experience of “marginal” groups; of vehement demands for a separate literary criticism to evaluate the work of women, of blacks, of homosexuals—after all this, now we are instructed that identification through “surface details” is spurious and that we need to go deeper to find “the shared human ground” where “our resemblance to one another becomes apparent.”

The fundamental problem with Ianonne’s statement, however, is that Minimalistic fiction is not superficial or devoid of a deeper moral foundation. In other words, it is not a manifestation of “Left-inspired literary criticism”: the style was established long before the advent of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and various other Poststructuralist theorists. It has been, and

continues to be, misunderstood in this regard. From “The Fiction We Deserve,” *Commentary* 83, no. 6 (1987): 61.

⁸⁶ David Kaufmann, “Yuppie Postmodernism,” *Arizona Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1991): 96-97.

⁸⁷ John Updike, “A Symposium On Contemporary American Fiction: John Updike,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 27, no. 1 (1988): 126. Ironically, Updike’s anthologized short story “Separating” (1974) employs many of the same techniques traditionally used by Minimalists. The terse dialogue in the final pages, as well as the biblically allusive ending, is reminiscent of works by Hemingway and Carver.

⁸⁸ Jay David Bellamy, “A Symposium On Contemporary American Fiction: Jay David Bellamy,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, no. 4 (1987): 695-96.

⁸⁹ T. Coraghessan Boyle, “A Symposium On Contemporary American Fiction: T. Coraghessan Boyle,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, no. 4 (1987): 707.

⁹⁰ Herzinger, “Introduction: On the New Fiction,” p. 10.

⁹¹ Raymond Carver “A Symposium On Contemporary American Fiction: Raymond Carver,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, no. 4 (1987): 711.

⁹² Stephen Koch and others, “Throwing Dirt on the Grave of Minimalism,” *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry & Prose*, no. 14 (1989): 46.

⁹³ *Models of the Universe*, ed. Stuart Frieber and David Young (Oberlin: Oberlin College Press, 1995); *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*, ed. David Lehman (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2003).

CHAPTER 2

AMY LOWELL, POLYPHONIC PROSE, AND THE EMERGENCE OF AMERICAN MINIMALISM

Amy Lowell's contribution to the development of literature in the twentieth century is prodigious but virtually unexamined. Shedding many of the Romantic impulses that influenced her first book of poetry, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*, Lowell's later works are composed of poems about objects and sensorial experiences rather than abstractions. She became a "member" of the Imagists in 1913, providing a sense of direction for the group after the schism with Ezra Pound in 1914, and used her considerable influence as a means to move away from the stylistic rigidity common in verse at that time. She considered herself a poet, but her work on a form of fiction she called Polyphonic Prose demonstrates a coherent melding of seemingly incompatible genres. She used her new mode to write narratives, perhaps best exemplified in the historically-based pieces in *Can Grande's Castle* (1918) and the engaging, fantastical stories found in *Legends* (1921).

The line between prose and poetry was a particular site of contention during Lowell's lifetime, and it was a topic about which she took a liberal position. The formal conservatism of the day was formidable, and poets such as Lowell were experimenting in a manner that aroused opposition. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, critics engaged in an ongoing discussion about the validity of *vers libre*, a term generally translated as "free verse." John

Livingston Lowes took up the question in *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* in 1919 while three years earlier, William Morrison Patterson opened *The Rhythm of Prose* by asking

what is prose and what is verse? Aristotle and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cicero and Quintilian, Professor Saintsbury and Professor Sievers, have all tried to tell us. No one yet, however, seems to be quite sure. Free verse and “poetic prose” are the disturbing ghosts which interpose their ambiguous outlines in the way of a decision.¹

Patterson suggested that the debate was active yet ultimately irresolvable. Lowell, John Gould Fletcher, Richard Aldington, H. D. and their cohorts essentially agreed with Patterson’s conclusion, writing in the introduction to *Some Imagist Poets 1916* that “there is no hard and fast dividing line between prose and poetry.”² The emergence of efficient, prose-poetic literature in the United States was a critical shift away from the florid, abstract style common in nineteenth-century British and Romantic fiction. Writers and poets returned to a mode based upon tenets of precision and efficiency that had “fallen into desuetude.”³ As Lowell and her companions continued to publish anthologies, the axioms first introduced by T. E. Hulme and Pound evolved into a lengthier list of guiding principles applicable to a broad range of categories. Lowell’s *Can Grande’s Castle*, written entirely in Polyphonic Prose, is one of the earliest collections of narratives to reflect the central attributes of American Literary Minimalism.

Polyphonic Prose is a form in which Lowell synthesized the stylistic compactness and depth of verse with the narrative elements of prose by employing what she termed the “voices” of poetry, devices such as rhyme, alliteration, and return.⁴ Lowell explained the concepts that informed her approach in the introduction to *Can Grande’s Castle*:

The poems are written in “polyphonic prose,” a form which has proved a stumbling block to many people. “Polyphonic prose” is perhaps a misleading title, as it tends to make the layman think that this is a prose form. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The word “prose” in its title simply refers to the manner in which the words are printed; “polyphonic”—many-voiced—giving the real key. “Polyphonic prose” is the freest, the most elastic, of all forms, for it follows at will any, and all, of the rules which guide other forms. Metrical verse has one set of laws, cadenced verse another; “polyphonic prose” can go from one to the other in the same poem with no sense of incongruity. Its only touchstone is the taste and feeling of its author.⁵

Despite her attempt to define the form as purely poetic, it is balanced mixture. The subjectivity inherent to the mode reflects one of its key attributes: it was intended to grant poets freedom within a constricted medium. Fletcher, who is sometimes named as a co-creator of the “many-voiced” tradition, wrote in a letter to Harriet Monroe that “all we claim for polyphonic is that it is a combination of verse invaded by prose emphasis (what might be called *vers libre*) and characteristic verse. We print it as prose—why? Merely to mark its freedom from set rules.”⁶ Lowell’s “The Bombardment,” first published in *Poetry* in 1914 and later included in *Men, Women and Ghosts*, illustrates many of the primary attributes of the form, particularly orchestral effects, rhythmic variance, and sensorial emphasis. In one of the most intense scenes in the piece, a young boy calls for his mother during an air-raid:

A child wakes and is afraid, and weeps in the darkness. What has made the bed shake? “Mother, where are you? I am awake.” “Hush, my Darling, I am here.”
 “But, Mother, something so queer happened, the room shook.” Boom! “Oh! What

is it? What is the matter?" Boom! "Where is father? I am so afraid." Boom! The child sobs and shrieks. The house trembles and creaks. Boom!⁷

The staccato pacing of the dialogue, the intensity of the mother-son exchange, acts as the figurative "orchestral melody" against the percussive repetition of falling bombs. While Lowell does not employ traditional meters in this passage, she develops a momentum similar in effect to a musical *accelerando*.

Lowell eschewed traditional meters but insisted that her work followed the rhythms not of common speech but of oration. She maintained that freeing herself from the strictures of formal methods allowed for increased flexibility, writing that she "finally decided to base" her "form upon the long, flowing cadence of oratorical prose. The variations permitted to this cadence enable the poet to change the more readily into those of *vers libre*, or even to take the regular beat of metre, should such a marked time seem advisable" (xii-xiii). In light of this irregularity and lack of restriction, the identification of rhythmic structure is subjective. Patterson divided reader-listeners into two groups, differentiating them in terms of their ability to organize beats into a recognizable pattern, positing that

there are individuals for whom a series of apparently irregular sounds can be easily organized subjectively into a satisfying rhythmic tune. There are also individuals for whom the task is difficult, if not impossible. Prose thus becomes for some observers a sort of music, built upon elastic unitary pulses, sometimes grouped and always syncopating freely; but for others, it remains, and must always remain, an utter mystery. . . .⁸

Lowell seemed concerned that readers who were perhaps not "aggressively rhythmic," as Patterson declared her to be, would not understand what she was trying to accomplish with

Polyphonic Prose.⁹ Thomas Hardy counted himself among the benighted, writing in a letter to Lowell in January of 1919, “I have not yet mastered your argument for ‘polyphonic prose’ — (Qy: polyphonic prosody?), but I daresay I shall discover it as I go on.”¹⁰ Based on the fact that Lowell repeated what she had written in *Can Grande’s Castle* in *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, she detected some measure of misunderstanding from her audience. While much has been written about the technical innovations of works such as *Can Grande’s Castle*, little has been said about Lowell’s deft use of allusion and implication.

Lowell endorsed the six revised Imagist principles in *Can Grande’s Castle* along with a seventh axiom she mentioned in *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*. The introduction to the first *Some Imagist Poets* anthology, a piece written by Richard Aldington and then edited to a minor degree by Lowell,¹¹ includes six rules:

1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word.

2. To create new rhythms—as the expression of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon “free – verse” as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as for a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional forms. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.

3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject. It is not good art to write badly about aeroplanes and automobiles; nor is it necessarily bad art to write well about the past. We believe passionately in the artistic value of modern

life, but we wish to point out that there is nothing so uninspiring nor so old-fashioned as an aeroplane of the year 1911.

4. To present an image (hence the name: “Imagist”). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art.

5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.

6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry.¹²

These tenets suggest that Pound’s original emphases were not cast aside but rather used as the foundation for an evolving aesthetic. T. E. Hulme emphasized many of the same ideas, particularly in terms of focusing on objects and using language that is “hard and clear.”¹³ Perhaps because of the growing influence of Asian poetry among the members of the group, Lowell added to the list “suggestion—the implying of something rather than the stating of it, implying it perhaps under a metaphor, perhaps in an even less obvious way.”¹⁴ This in part explains Lowell’s generous use of allusion and implication by omission in works such as *Men, Women and Ghosts* and *Can Grande’s Castle*. Ernest Hemingway owned a copy of *Tendencies in American Poetry*, so it is possible that Imagist ideas influenced the development of his Iceberg Principle.¹⁵ Aldington and his cohorts maintained that they had discovered “the essentials of all great poetry indeed of all great literature,” and it was Lowell’s migration into prosaic forms that provided part of the impetus for the emergence of American Minimalism.¹⁶

The criticism of *Can Grande's Castle* suggests that Lowell's Minimalistic tendencies were admired but misunderstood. Reviewers and scholars often lauded Lowell for her ability to convey images objectively, to "paint" a vibrant picture, but also remarked about how her fiction tended to be over-stimulating and shallow. Winfield Townley Scott maintained that her works "have vigor and verve" yet "do much" and "say little."¹⁷ James W. Tupper said that he had experienced sensory overload, opining that "the style of this polyphonic prose hits one in the face all the time. It is very emphatic, staccato, abrupt, so that one feels as if he had been shouted at through a hundred pages. But the wealth of imagery, the variety of diction, the innumerable manifestations of beauty reveal the genius of the author as nothing else she has done."¹⁸ Harriet Monroe, whose essays on Lowell often seem to reflect a begrudged respect, echoed Tupper's sentiments: "The poems become over-picturesque, and their vivid presentations of people and places, contrasts and paradoxes, too studied, too brilliant. The winds blow too sharply—one can scarcely breathe. . . . The eye can scarcely see, or the ear hear, for the glitter, for the blare."¹⁹ An anonymous reader for *The North American Review* implied that Lowell's poems are a series of surface effects, writing that "words make us think, and the polyphonic prose will not let us think" before concluding that the mode "constantly arouses and then represses the tendency to reflect coherently."²⁰ While the narratives that comprise *Can Grande's Castle* are acutely sensorial, they are also intellectually complex.

The title itself, *Can Grande's Castle*, is an historical allusion that has considerable bearing on the development of the work as a whole. Lowell took the phrase from a line in Aldington's "At the British Museum," which is a reference to the Castle Vecchio in Verona, Italy.²¹ S. Foster Damon posited that it "was the refuge of Dante" and that in Lowell's fiction it "represents the poet's refuge from the world, and the high point from which he can view it."²²

While the connection to Dante is important, it is the grandiosity of the figure of Can Grande della Scala himself that in part explains the significance of the allusion. The collection is composed of poems about heroes, figures, and objects that played a role in major historical events. According to R. W. B. Lewis, Can Grande was “strikingly handsome, soldierly in bearing, and normally gracious in manner.” He was also an excellent leader, uniting Vicenza, Verona, and Padua through deft military and political maneuvers.²³ The viceroy was exceedingly kind to Dante throughout his career, even providing for his sons’ educations.²⁴ Lowell wrote that the development of Polyphonic Prose was motivated by her desire “to find a new form for epic poetry,” and Can Grande is a worthy figurehead.²⁵

The figure of Can Grande also represents a movement away from the horrors of World War I because he is an example of a hero of old who was a “sane” man, a patron of fine art, who opposed the forces of division. Lowell opens her preface by directly addressing the historical context in which her poems were being released, revealing an event she refers to throughout *Can Grande’s Castle*:

They all owe their existence to the war, for I suppose that, had there been no war, I should never have thought of them. They are scarcely war poems, in the strict sense of the word, not are they allegories in which the present is made to masquerade as the past. Rather, they are the result of a vision thrown suddenly back upon remote events to explain a strange and terrible reality. “Explain” is hardly the word, for to explain the subtle causes which force men, once in so often, to attempt to break the civilization they have been at pains to rear, and so oblige other, saner, men to oppose them, is scarcely the province of poetry. Poetry works more deviously, but perhaps not less conclusively (vii).

Lowell subtly says much about her style. She does not view her function as poet to sermonize or elucidate the reasons for death, battle, or even the production of statues and literature. Like the Impressionists who preceded her, and with whom she shares much in common, she respects the epistemic barriers inherent to the nature of experience. Her speakers limit themselves to sensorial reportage, an imaginative but “true” recreation of actual occurrences, and rarely attempt to argue a distinct rationale for what transpires. Lowell attempts to let the poignancy of her images suggest and imply the significance of what she portrays.

In the opening narrative of *Can Grande's Castle*, “Sea-Blue and Blood-Red,” Lowell recasts the love affair and martial exploits of one of Great Britain’s most admired heroes, Lord Horatio Nelson.²⁶ The structure of the plot is fragmentary, a byproduct of the speaker’s method of using the *vistazo* technique to create a series of different yet dramatic scenes. “Sea-Blue” is unified, however, by Lowell’s use of return. Red and blue are used to represent various emotions, particularly when employed within imagistic correlatives.²⁷ In what is one of the more thorough but misguided readings of “Sea-Blue,” Damon maintained that

realism merges into symbolism, then re-emerges; for Nelson himself is the blue of the sea, Emma the blood-red whose interweaving and unraveling is the *leitmotif* marking the beginning and end of episodes, and binding the whole poem together. In fact, the significance of each event becomes so intense as to make that event a symbol, which is in turn a stage in the story. Thus the admiral’s ship coming to anchor beneath the volcano is no mere preparation for the meeting of the lovers: it is Nelson himself as lover — the warrior, after his great achievements, returning to haven for rest, restoration, happiness, which he finds through a woman. Only by following the series of symbols can the plot be

followed; but such was Amy Lowell's skill, that no audience ever was baffled by the meaning of the poems in *Can Grande's Castle*.²⁸

Lowell uses virtually no symbolism in the collection. Nelson's vessel is a ship and Vesuvius is a volcano. Each object does, however, carry additional non-symbolic associations. Despite her lack of a formal university education, Lowell was erudite and well-read, and much of the material that informs the poems were from "books in her library."²⁹ The various letters and biographies of Nelson reveal that red and blue are colors that can be applied to both Lady Emma Hamilton, Nelson's mistress, and Nelson himself. Lowell seems to have expected her audience to either know Nelson's personality and exploits or to at least be willing to research her subject matter to the same degree she had.

"Sea-Blue" begins with a description of a brief moment in time, Impressionistic in its emphasis upon light and color. The speaker describes how the blue "sky is unspecked by clouds, but the sea is flecked with pink and white light shadows, and silver scintillations snip-snap over the tops of waves" (3). The scene lacks the clutter of later images, and it is reminiscent of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's "The Wave" in that it suggests only a subtle distinction between sky and sea. In Part II, the serenity of the ocean gives way to the bustling city of Naples with its "red tiles," "little business, shouting, bawling" and incessant "calling." City scenes are a favorite subject of Literary Impressionists because they are often the site of simultaneous convergences of multiple sensations. Naples was also the site of Nelson's early dalliances with Emma Hamilton, the backdrop for their growing passion.³⁰ The speaker mentions "the crimson, watching eye of Vesuvius," which on its surface seems somewhat incongruous. With "the watching eye," Lowell may have been alluding to Sir William Hamilton, Emma's husband and the man Nelson cuckolded. Hamilton, thirty-five years older than his wife, served as England's ambassador to

Naples for twenty-nine years, but he had “made his name known” by publishing his “observations of the volcanic Mount Vesuvius, which he had climbed many times.”³¹ Even though he is not mentioned by name in “Sea-Blue,” Lowell has given him a fiery and watchful presence within the narrative. Lowell creates a complex association between visual color and internal emotional states. Red is the color of passion, lasciviousness, of “red-light districts,” but also of anger. Both Nelson and his lover were known to be tempestuous, particularly over small matters.³²

The speaker’s characterization of Emma suggests that “Sea-Blue” is a poem told from the perspective of the two lovers rather than a critical, external figure. Lowell said in a letter to Barrett Wendell of the works that comprise *Can Grande’s Castle*, “I have been very accurate in these historical poems, perhaps more accurate than a poet has any business to be. In fact, fearing in some way to travesty my originals, every remark that Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton make in the first poem has been copied from their letters. My facts are correct throughout. . . .”³³ The narrator conveys the feelings of Nelson in her first description of Lady Hamilton:

Have you seen her—the Ambassadors? Ah, *Bellissima Creatura! Una Donna Rara!* She is fairer than the Blessed Virgin; and good! Never was such a soul in such a body! The role of her benefactions would stretch from here to Posilipo. And she loves the people, loves to go among them and speak to this one and that, and her apple-blossom face under the big blue hat works miracles like the Holy Images in the Churches (5).

In his letters Nelson described her in similarly hyperbolic and religious terms. He wrote to his mistress that on her birthday, he held a dinner in her honor along with his fellow officers, whom he “invited to assist at the fête of Santa Emma. In the morning Divine Service then as good a

dinner in this fleet than all the Saints in the Roman Calendar . . . there is certainly more of the Angel than the human being about you.”³⁴ Nelson was equally effusive in his other correspondence, writing in a missive dated August 24, 1803, that “in short, in every point of view, from Ambassatrice to the duties of domestic life, I never saw your equal! That elegance of manners; accomplishments; and, above all, your goodness of heart, is unparalleled: and only believe, for ever, and beyond it. . . .” Two days later he continued in a similar vein, saying that “I only desire, my dearest Emma, that you will always believe, that Nelson’s your own; Nelson’s *Alpha* and *Omega* is *Emma*! I cannot alter; my affection and love is beyond even this world!”³⁵ Given the worshipful nature of his adoration, comparing Emma to the “Blessed Virgin” seems an accurate representation of Nelson’s perceptions. In the context of Emma Hamilton’s biography, however, his praise is intensely ironic.

Nelson’s idealization of Lady Emma Hamilton, which Lowell propagates, suggests that he either had a remarkable ability to disregard her past or that he knew little about it. She was born Amy Lyon in Cheshire, England, to impoverished parents. Her beauty, however, was a valuable asset. In his 1899 biography *The Life of Nelson*, A. T. Mahan was unrelenting in his description of Emma’s character, maintaining that

she had found her way up to London, while yet little more than a child, and there, having a beautiful face, much natural charm of manner and disposition, utterly inexperienced, and with scarcely any moral standards, — of which her life throughout shows but little trace, — she was speedily mined, fell so far, in fact, that even with all her attractions it seemed doubtful whether any man would own himself responsible for her condition, or befriend her.³⁶

Roger Knight posited that it is “likely” that Lady Hamilton was a prostitute while in London before she became mistress to a succession of men that included Sir Harry Featherstonehaugh, Charles Greville, and Sir Hamilton for five years before he married her.³⁷ Despite the fact that in pursuing his relationship Nelson had betrayed his wife, Frances, Emma was viewed by some in Britain as a shameless corrupter. She had sullied the reputation of an English national hero, a man whose unconditional adoration of her was, by some accounts, the result of the Ambassatrice’s guile. Mahan remarked that she was “ambitious and exceptionally clever.”³⁸ Even though Nelson is one of the foremost military strategists in history, some of his peers felt that he was playing “the fool” by giving into her charms.³⁹ Lowell implies that he was a man who perhaps loved unconditionally, whose martial acumen was equaled by his capacity for passion. “Sea-Blue” is a reclamation and a defense. All of Nelson’s actions are portrayed with verve; Lowell renders both his victories and his follies with imagistic vividness.

The narration of the Battle of the Nile, Nelson’s legendary rout of Napoleon’s fleet at Aboukir Bay, exemplifies Lowell’s stylistic force. Her use of motion and color capture the sensorial intensity of battle:

Seven hundred and forty guns open fire on the French fleet. The sun sinks into the purple-red water, its low, straight light playing gold on the slaughter. Yellow fire, shot with red, in wheat sheafs from the guns; and a racket and ripping which jerks the nerves, then stuns, until another broadside crashes the ears alive again. The men shine with soot and sweat, and slip in the blood which wets the deck (12-13).

The narrator is not speaking in first person but is situated in Nelson’s consciousness, re-imagining what he sees and feels as the battle progresses. The “purple-red” of the water is in part a function of the time of day; Nelson attacked in the early-morning hours of August 1, 1798.⁴⁰

Lowell's use of rhyme invests a sense of pace into the moment, the rhythmic firing of the guns leads into the image of men slipping in red blood. Later in this section, after the confrontation has ceased, Nelson writes a letter in the midst of dancing "reflections of blue water" that will not last (16).

Ultimately, the lively pace of the action, the excitement of experience, contrasts with the inevitability of the hero's death. Lowell continues the tragedy of Nelson with sections on Naples, the Admiral's death at the Battle of Trafalgar, and Emma's ignominious burial at Calais. Consistent with the Minimalist aesthetic, Lowell does not incorporate passages that include moments of contemplation or anything beyond direct reportage. The scene in which Nelson dies seems anti-climactic. With little attempt to sentimentalize the demise of the protagonist, the narrator quotes Nelson's alleged final words and says that "in the log-book of the *Victory*, it is written: 'Partial firing continued until 4.30, when a victory having been reported to the Right Honourable Lord Viscount Nelson, K. B., he died of his wound' "(45). Accentuating the temporality of love and glory, Emma's simple grave is described as "a poor thing and now even that has gone" (46). "Sea-Blue," like all of the poems in *Can Grande's Castle*, is eulogistic in its depiction of the dissolution of heroic deeds and once-golden eras.

First published in *The Seven Arts* in 1917, "Guns as Keys: And the Great Gate Swings" is a lamentation over the treaty of Japan to trade with the United States, a process begun by Commodore Matthew C. Perry.⁴¹ The speaker does not treat the expedition with a sense of reverence, instead depicting the sailors as single-minded and culturally insensitive. Their lack of sophistication leads them to refer to the Japanese with derision: "Wait! Wait! These monkey-men have got to trade, Uncle Sam has laid his plans with care, see those black guns sizzling there" (57). The poem is largely a critique of Francis L. Hawks's account of the journey,

Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan. Lowell had read the book, mentioning it in her essay “Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry.”⁴² In his biography of Lowell, Jean Gould wrote that “Guns as Keys” had been “based on the stories that August Belmont had told about his grandfather, Comdr. Joseph Matthew Perry, the naval officer who had played a key role in the flash war that swung wide the trade gate to the Orient.”⁴³ While some of the details incorporated into the plot may have come from Belmont’s anecdotes, Lowell’s narrative closely follows the structure of Hawks’s version of events. For example, Hawks detailed a relatively minor occurrence upon the Commodore’s arrival on Madeira: “Knowing that the wind, for the last few days, must have thrown into the bay of Funchal a heavy swell, rendering anchorage there unsafe, it was determined to run under the lee of the ‘Deserters,’ and there wait a favorable moment for anchoring in the roads.”⁴⁴ Lowell’s speaker relates the scene in a more dramatic manner, describing how the *Mississippi*

noses her way through the wallowing sea; foots it, bit by bit, over the slanting wave slopes; pants along, thrust forward by her breathing furnaces, urged ahead by the wind draft flattening against her taught sails.

The Commodore, leaning over the taffrail, sees the peak of Madeira sweep up out of the haze. The *Mississippi* glides into smooth water, and anchors under the lee of the “Desertas” (53).

Creatively reimagining Hawks’s account, Lowell depicts the feminized ship fighting bravely against the sea, “breathing” through her “furnaces,” while Perry benefits from her labor. He is characterized as nonchalant and exploitive throughout the piece.

“Guns as Keys” is both stylistically and thematically similar to “Sea-Blue” but Lowell’s approach to the protagonist is different. “Guns as Keys” differs from her prose-poem about

Nelson, however, illustrating Lowell's ability to shift from Polyphonic Prose into verse, a movement that she maintained was only possible because of the freedom allowed by her new form (x-xi). Each image is a brilliant still-life, although some include dialogue and seem more reminiscent of a brief scene in a play. Commodore Perry, despite in many ways being the focus of the "drama," does not have a meaningful presence within the work. His position as military leader and sailor creates an obvious parallel with Nelson, but his actions are not similarly heroic nor does he perish at the end. In one of her more didactic moments, Lowell suggest that Perry's mission is misconstrued as a noble enterprise: "Romance and heroism: and all to make one dollar two" (70). In "Sea-Blue," Nelson's passion and glorious victories are transformed into art, his experiences sublimated. Perry's actions are given no such treatment. Japan is the imagistic source of beauty, and when it is opened by the swinging of the "great gate," much is lost.

"Guns as Keys" begins slowly, recounting some of the minor details involving the day-to-day operations of the expedition, but becomes more complex when Lowell includes the first of her "portraits" written in verse form. The shuffle of industry, the motion of the wharves at Norfolk and the advance of Perry's ship, *Mississippi*, is contrasted with a serene image from the Japanese countryside:

At Mishima in the Province of Kai,
 Three men are trying to measure a pine tree
 By the length of their outstretched arms.
 Trying to span the bole of a huge pine tree
 By the spread of their lifted arms (51).

M. L. Schwartz correctly identified this as a poetic description of a work by the Japanese painter Hokusai.⁴⁵ The piece is entitled "Kōshū Mishima-goe," or "Mishima Pass in Kai Province," and

depicts a total of seven people near the trunk of a giant conifer. Three men have their arms spread wide around the circumference of the tree. Cloud-covered Mount Fuji is blue near its top, a volcano that forms an imagistic parallel with the “red eye” of Vesuvius described in “Sea-Blue.” Jocelyn Bouquillard maintained that the men are “situated to the northwest of Hakone on the Tōkaidō Road, some eighteen miles from Fuji” and that they may be performing a “ritual act of veneration for the tree.”⁴⁶ Lowell subtly suggests that the “simple life” of the peasants, one of whom is smoking a pipe off to the left of his companions, is threatened by the inexorable, churning “paddle-wheels” of the Commodore’s patriotically-festooned steamer.

In addition to her allusion to Hokusai, Lowell refers to a legend associated with the island of Mauritius. Upon reaching the country, two crewmen engage in a brief conversation:

“Who were Paul and Virginia?” “Oh, a couple of spooneys who died here, in a shipwreck, because the lady wouldn’t take off her smock.” “I say, Fred, that’s a shabby way to put it. You’ve no sentiment.” “Maybe. I don’t read much myself, and when I do, I prefer United States, something like old Artemus Ward, for instance” (65-66).

Bernardin St. Pierre’s *Paul and Virginia*, originally published in 1787, is a tale about a young woman and man who grow up together on Mauritius. Both are raised without their fathers, and their mothers live together on the same plot of land. The two youngsters are extremely close, like brother and sister, and St. Pierre hyperbolically describes their great beauty and innocence in biblical terms, writing that

still in the morning of life, they had all its blooming freshness; and surely such in the garden of Eden appeared our first parents, when, coming from the hands of God, they first saw, approached, and conversed together, like brother and sister.

Virginia was gentle, modest, and confiding as Eve; and Paul, like Adam, united the figure of manhood with the simplicity of a child.⁴⁷

The pre-lapsarian perfection of their childhood does not last, however. Virginia's mother, Madame de La Tour, was born into the French aristocracy but married below her rank, leading her to live in isolation from her family. Her aunt, however, finds her and writes a letter in which she says that if Madame will send Virginia back to France and allow her to be educated as a lady, she would make the girl her sole heir. The decision over whether to send her causes great emotional tension between Paul and his "sister." Madame de La Tour feels it is best, particularly because the teen-ager has begun to have sexual yearnings for Paul but is too young to marry. After much swooning and histrionics, Virginia surreptitiously leaves and Paul becomes distraught and suicidal. On Christmas Eve of 1774, Paul learns that Virginia has returned to Mauritius on a ship, the Saint Geran, after having been declared an incorrigible by her aunt. Before the ship is able to land, however, a hurricane strikes and the boat is unable to find safety. The crewmen strip naked in the hopes that it will make them less susceptible to being blown away by high winds. One of the men tries to rescue Virginia and tells her to disrobe, but she "repulsed him with modesty, and turned away her head."⁴⁸ Following the example of Saint Gereon, the man for whom her ship was named, Virginia loses her life because she will not compromise her virtue.⁴⁹ Her purity intact, Virginia soars from the ship and Paul later finds her corpse on a nearby beach. Her story is not ignored by the local populace, and "companies of young girls ran from the neighboring plantations to touch the coffin of Virginia with their scarves, chaplets, and crowns of flowers, invoking her as a saint. Mothers asked of heaven a child like Virginia; lovers, a heart as faithful; the poor, as tender a friend; and the slaves, as kind

a mistress.”⁵⁰ Fred’s rejection of such a lugubrious tale in favor of the rustic local-color of Artemus Ward is unsurprising given the way the sailors are characterized.

Lowell does not allude to *Paul and Virginia* solely for reasons of characterization. “Guns as Keys” is thematically similar because it too is a work about the loss of “innocence.” Just as the young couple is forced to separate, Perry and his comrades use threats as a means to open the “great gate.” Even though Japan would have preferred to protect its cultural “purity,” even with its survival placed under duress, like Virginia Japan’s shogunate was forced to choose between two “evils.” Lowell suggests a parallel between the aunt and the United States, as both figures are portrayed as predatory figures who will not be denied. Hawks writes a detailed account of the historical context of *Paul and Virginia*, concluding that despite the fact that “an eccentric French gentleman” had re-created the huts that the young couple lived in, the legend was a fictitious creation based on the wreck of a vessel called the Saint Gévan. Hawks’s most interesting assumption, however, is that “it is not to be supposed that, among those who read at all, there are many who are unacquainted with the beautiful story of Paul and Virginia. . . .”⁵¹ In 1856 it was a tale that, in Hawks’s estimation, carried great relevance among the educated.

Lowell’s own erudition reverts from French sentimentalism to Asian art as the narrative progresses. After the inevitable “success” of Perry’s mission, she concludes with a poem entitled “Postlude,” inspired by the haiku form, about a castle vacated by its army:

Deserted ancient moat
 About an ancient stronghold,
 Your bowmen are departed,
 Your strong walls are silent,
 Their only echo

A croaking of frogs.

Frogs croaking at the moon

In the ancient moat

Of an ancient, crumbling castle.

Rather than sermonizing about the depth of Japan's cultural loss, Lowell presents images of decay and neglect. Although it is subtle, she is also acknowledging her own debt to Perry. The final three lines are an allusion to one of Matsuo Bashō's haiku

At the ancient pond

a frog plunges into

the sound of water.⁵²

The desolation and hopelessness in Lowell's criticism of Perry's expedition are somewhat mitigated by the final scenes. In a section titled "1903. Japan," the narrator describes a young man who has jumped from a cliff to his death. Before taking his life, he carves his final thoughts into the trunk of a tree, and he concludes that "for the first time I know that extreme pessimism and extreme optimism are one" (97). His words are an epistemology governed by the concept of balance, informing the speaker's conclusion in "1903. America":

"Nocturne—Blue and Silver—Battersea Bridge.

Nocturne—Grey and Silver—Chelsea Embankment.

Variations in Violet and Green."

Pictures in a glass-roofed gallery, and all day long the throng of people is so great that one can scarcely see them. Debits—credits? Flux and flow through a wide gateway. Occident—Orient—after fifty years (97).

Lowell is alluding to the meeting of East and West in the visual arts, the lines of influence made possible following the signing of Perry's treaty. Julian Bicknell maintained that the opening of Japan resulted in

an influx of Japanese art and artifacts to the West, including the prints of Hiroshige. The vogue for all things Japanese swept Europe. As early as 1870, Parisians could pick up copies of his prints in shops and stalls on the left bank of the Seine. The artists of the day were clearly fascinated, collecting the copies, and developing Japanese ideas in their own work.⁵³

Lowell's first three lines refer to three paintings by American Impressionist James McNeill Whistler, two of which are from his series of "Nocturnes." The first, "Nocturne—Blue and Silver—Battersea Bridge," composed circa 1871-72, is a screen created for a Liverpoolian merchant named Frederick Leyland. It is a rough depiction of the bridge, less detailed than his later work "Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge."⁵⁴ Both were inspired by a wood-block print by Hiroshige entitled "Kyobashi: The Bamboo Yards" (1857).⁵⁵ "Nocturne—Grey and Silver—Chelsea Embankment" (1879) is a murky depiction of an iced-over Thames in winter, perhaps inspired by one of Hiroshige's night scenes.⁵⁶ "Variations in Violet and Green" (1871) differs from the other two works in that it is a daytime scene, a work that "represents an extreme moment in Whistler's ten year [sic] exploration of Japanese art."⁵⁷ The paratactic impressions that close "Guns as Keys" are cryptic and relatively meaningless bereft of contextual information about Whistler's works and the piece by Hiroshige that inspired it. Lowell charges the former with plagiarism, playing on the term "credit." The narrator chides the "throng of people" who, she implies, do not fully appreciate what has been sacrificed in the name of commercial pleasure.

Lowell's allusion to Whistler is also a complex reference to her own artistic process. She is implicitly acknowledging that her works, like his, are influenced by Asian aesthetic principles. The verse "portraits" of daily life in Japan bear resemblances to the same works by Hokusai and Hiroshige that influenced European Impressionists. During his nighttime ventures on the Thames, Whistler could only sketch, not paint, while a passenger in his boat. Because his technique called for him to lay his canvasses flat on the floor, his oil paintings were composed in his studio rather than *en plein air*. According to Richard Dormant and Margaret F. MacDonald, "the key that enabled him to recreate this mysterious and silent world on canvas can be summed up in one word: memory."⁵⁸ Lowell works in a similar manner in that she reconstructed "Guns as Keys" from Belmont's tales and Hawks's official account. In her reference to Whistler, she is subtly addressing her own methods, acknowledging that she too has operated as borrower. The difference between her and the uninformed "throngs" is that she is aware of her debt to the "Orient."

"Hedge Island: A Retrospect and a Prophecy," originally published in *The North American Review* in August of 1918, is thematically and stylistically consistent with "Sea-Blue" and "Guns as Keys" but comparatively unconventional in terms of content.⁵⁹ As the title suggests, the narrative is both nostalgic and harrowing. One of the "heroes" in the piece are the hedges of England, notable for their constancy more than their "deeds." Minimalist authors frequently invest everyday objects with a sense of emotional power suggesting that there is beauty in the mundane. In the first section, the speaker describes how the "hedges of England, road after road, lane after lane, and on again to the sea at the North, to the sea at the East" form a figurative "nervous system" for the island. They line and protect the roads, absorb abuse, but are visually unchanging even though they are living, growing things. "His Majesty's mails" pass by

them while being conveyed to the “provinces,” suggesting that the hedges are the thankless overseers that allow the English to communicate.

Like all of the poems in *Can Grande's Castle*, “Hedge Island” is a eulogy for a lost era assembled from Lowell’s textual research. The plot is the weakest of the four pieces, but it is the most complex in terms of allusiveness. The narrative is a retrospective mourning and celebrating the colorful lives of the many coachmen of England no longer needed following the arrival of the steam-engine locomotive. Lowell appears to have relied heavily upon Harold Esdaile Malet’s *Annals of the Road: Or, Notes on Mail and Stage Coaching in Great Britain* for much of her information. *Annals* is a miscellany, a collection of accounts and anecdotes by a variety of figures who had experience with coach-driving. In one of the first images allusive to Malet, the speaker describes “twenty-seven fine crimson coaches drawn up in double file in Lombard Street. Great gold-starred coaches, blazing with royal insignia, waiting in line at the Post-Office” (102). The mail-coach system was an innovation developed by John Palmer and began service on August 8, 1784. At Palmer’s insistence, all of the vehicles would line up at the General Post Office and simultaneously depart, regardless of their final destination.⁶⁰ The scene is a fitting subject for a passage written in Polyphonic Prose because of its synesthetic qualities. The narrator describes the movement of color, voices shouting, and how “the stones of St. Martin’s-le-Grand sparkle under the slap of iron shoes” (102). The narrator offers no exposition or contextual background. Typical of Minimalist authors, Lowell focuses upon sensorial experience, placing the onus upon her audience to decipher the specific event being depicted.

While the imagery in “Hedge Island” is typically fragmentary, so too is the historical chronology of events. Lowell sets part of the poem during the later years of the Napoleonic Wars, between 1812 and 1815. As mail carriages move through various towns, passing the ever-

present hedges, voices chant, “Go! Go! News of the World! Perhaps a victory! the ‘Nile’ or the ‘Salamanca’!” (106). “Salamanca” is a reference to the famous routing of the French in 1812 by Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington during the Iberian campaigns against Napoleon.⁶¹ Later in the piece, the narrator exclaims, “Go it, England, you will beat Bonaparte yet” (116), an indication that combat has not yet ended. The broader implication, however, is that the stage-coach was an integral part of daily life in the English countryside. Lowell indirectly alludes to a quotation from Thomas de Quincey’s “Selections, Grave and Gay” found in Malet:

“It was the mail coach,” says De Quincey, “that distributed over the face of the land, like the opening of apocalyptic vials, the heart-shaking news of Trafalgar, of Salamanca, of Vittoria, of Waterloo.” Dressed in laurels and flowers, oak leaves and ribbons, these coaches took down into the country the first news of any of the numerous victories achieved by English valour on the Continent. . . .”⁶²

Lowell suggests that mail-coaches were at one time an indispensable element of community. They are, in other words, an inextricable part of England’s gloried history.

Lowell includes other images, however, that depict the difficulties and dangers of coach travel. She describes “Christmas weather with a hard frost” (113), an allusion to the “fearful snowstorm of December 1836” that halted all traffic out of London from the twenty-fifth to the twenty-seventh.⁶³ Malet includes a number of illustrations depicting carriages and riders struggling through deep snow as well as an anecdote about the tragic events of Tuesday, December 27. The Liverpool Mail was caught in a drift near another stranded “chariot . . . very nearly buried in snow” with “two ladies inside.” Unable to help them, the coachman and his guard had to leave the women “to their fate.”⁶⁴ While much of the poem is a celebration of the

aesthetic splendor of coach-driving, in this section Lowell tends away from the hyperbolic and sentimental by alluding to the risks that were involved.

Lowell's debt to Malet is not exclusive to his historical record; she also seems to have been inspired by the aesthetic of his contributors. Malet includes a brief vignette entitled "Retrospective" that is remarkably similar to work produced by Imagists forty years later. The speaker describes a city scene from the perspective of a coachman in London:

At six in the morning everything is comparatively still. The chimes of the different churches appear to be louder, only because they are more distinctly heard. Covent Garden market-men and basket-women are pouring in with their vegetables, fruits, and flowers. The battered beau is observed steering homewards but half-sobered, and one would think entirely wretched; while the solitary hackney cab is seen here and there passing sleepily along with a cargo of prime youths, anything but half-sober, or a tawdry heap of damsels who have been Cremorning, or routing, or what not. . . .⁶⁵

Lowell appears to have re-written this scene from the perspective of her narrator, who is perhaps conveying the experience of an unnamed mail-carrier moving through the streets of England's capital:

"Buy a pottle of plums, Good Sir." "Cherries, fine, ripe cherries O." Get your plums and cherries, and hurry into the *White Horse Cellar* for a last rum and milk. You are a poet, bound to Dover over Westminster Bridge. Ah, well, all the same. You are an Essex farmer, grown fat by selling your peas at Covent Garden Market at four guineas a pint (108).

Maintaining the sensorial nature of the metropolis, a synesthetic mixture of visions and voices, Lowell re-calibrates the point of view in order to better emphasize sensory experience, the sound and movement of a bustling street. She moves her figure closer to the action, offering a more specific account of what is being seen and heard.

While Lowell's dependence on Malet and his collaborators is significant, she also alludes to other sources. In one scene, a coachman and his team ride through Hindhead on the Old Portsmouth Road "with the wind roaring and squeaking over the heather." The narrator cryptically reveals that "the murder, they say, was done at this spot." Through dialogue, Lowell suggests a somewhat comic scene between the coachman and a cowardly companion: " 'Lord, I wish I had a nip of cherry-brandy.' 'What was that; down in the bowl!' 'Drop my arm, Damn you! or you will roll the coach over!' " (115). The man's fear is inspired by his memory of the notorious murder of a sailor traveling the Portsmouth Road on Sept. 24, 1786. The unnamed victim was said to have begun his evening at an inn, generously buying drinks for three men. After he left, his "friends" attacked him and he was "barbarously murder'd."⁶⁶ A memorial stone was originally placed along the road but was moved to an open common on Gibbet Hill. According to writer and historian Thomas Wright, it reads

ERECTED
IN DETESTATION OF A BARBAROUS MURDER
COMMITTED HERE ON AN UNKNOWN SAILOR,
ON SEPT. 24TH, 1786.
BY EDWD. LONEGON, MICHL. CASEY AND JAS. MARSHALL
WHO WERE ALL TAKEN THE SAME DAY,
AND HUNG IN CHAINS NEAR THIS PLACE.

“Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.”—Gen. chap. 9, ver. 6.⁶⁷

The narrator suggests that the men are riding by shortly after the killers have been hanged, commenting that the wind “blows the caged bones all about, one or two of them have dropped out” (116). The scared passenger’s mention of a “bowl” is a reference to The Devil’s Punch Bowl, a valley that appears circular when viewed from Gibbet Hill.⁶⁸ Lowell’s allusion is multi-layered: the coachman’s desire for a “nip of cherry-brandy” is likely inspired by the fact that he is near a “punch bowl.”

Lowell’s reference to the murder on Hind Head is rather intricate, so it is unusual that her use of historical fact in an allusion near the end of “Hedge Island” is rather muddled. She makes reference to British prize-fighting, describing the fight as a raucous gathering of the working class. Relating a statement from an unnamed coachman, the narrator says

England forever—going to the Prize Fight on Copthorne Common. England
forever, with a blue coat and scarlet lining hanging over the back of the tilbury.
England driving a gig and one horse; England set up with a curricule and two.
England in donkey carts and coaches. England swearing, pushing, drinking,
happy, off to see the “Game Chicken” punch the “Nonpareil’s” face to a black-
and-blue jelly (118).

Lowell was likely working from Henry Downes Miles’s three-volume treatise *Pugilistica: The History of British Boxing*, published in 1906. An exhaustive work, it details the lives and careers of many of the major boxers in Great Britain from 1719 to 1863. The site of Lowell’s event, Copthorne Common, is a real place that did indeed host fights in nineteenth-century England. In what was perhaps the most famous bout held in that field, a black Virginian named Tom Molineaux fought and was defeated by reigning British champion Tom Cribbs on December 18,

1810.⁶⁹ The patriotic references to England are likely motivated by the fact that the bout was against an American. The nicknames “Game Chicken” and “Nonpareil” refer to actual boxers, but the two men never fought one another. Henry “The Game Chicken” Pearce was declared champion during his brief career (1803-1805), but passed away in 1809, the same year that Jack “The Nonpareil” Randall began what would be an illustrious fighting campaign. Randall may have been of special interest to Lowell because several poems were written about him during and after his lifetime.⁷⁰ Lowell was generally accurate in her use of contextual information, but her passage on pugilism is a rare yet interesting exception.

In the “prophecy” section of “Hedge Island,” Lowell alludes to a literary tradition of nostalgia and disappointment over the arrival of the steam-engine. The narrator makes a portentous observation when she says that “in the distance there is a puff of steam. Just a puff, but it will do” (119). The poem is a retrospective, a glorification of a way of life hopelessly fallen into obsolescence. Malet’s twenty-fourth chapter, subtitled “Memories and Regrets,” includes a passage by an anonymous author who laments the passing of his era: “ ‘In the vivid remembrance of such scenes, it is scarcely surprising that we should regret that they has passed away: that tidings must now be transmitted by steam or electric telegraph, and that the voice of the trumpet that once announced from afar the approach of the laurelled mails, should be lost amid the hissing or shrieks of the locomotive’ .”⁷¹ Just as she has done with Nelson’s letters and Hawks’s account of Perry’s expedition, Lowell is offering a poetic retelling of a tragedy. Her ominous steam is only a “prophecy” within the context of dramatic irony: her audience knows the outcome long before it is revealed.

The four-horse team commonly used on mail-delivery carriages, largely forgotten, provides an imagistic parallel with the final poem in *Can Grande’s Castle*, “The Bronze Horses.”

The hero in the concluding narrative is an inanimate object with representational, rather than symbolic, significance. The piece is a far-reaching retrospective constructed around the decorative bronze horses of Saint Mark's Cathedral in Venice. Lowell's choice of subject is intriguing; few art objects have had a similar history. She was presumably working from sources that have largely been discredited, so some of her scholarship is outdated. For example, the horses were cast out of copper, not bronze.⁷² The four sections of Lowell's subtitles suggest that she held the traditional view that the horses originated in Rome, were then moved to Constantinople, captured by the Venetians, then lost and regained during the Napoleonic Wars. Recent scholarship, however, suggests a significantly different early history. The statues were likely cast on the Greek island of Chios, brought to the Byzantine capital Constantinople in the fifth century by Theodosius II, and mounted on a tower at the north side of the Hippodrome.⁷³ In his book *The Horses of St. Mark's*, Charles Freeman insisted that "there is not a shred of evidence that the horses originally came from Rome."⁷⁴ Regardless, it is with a sculptor in Italy that Lowell's horses begin.

"The Bronze Horses" recounts the life spans of nations and leaders. Typical of the collection, it is a series of fragmented images of war, grandeur, and societal change. The opening image recounts the fires of creation, the heat generated to melt the elements poured into a cast below ground. The speaker says that "so are metals fused in twisted flames and take on a form other than that they have known, and this new form shall be to them rebirth and making" (123), developing the primary themes in the poem. Civilization, Lowell suggests, is art and is remembered through written and material evidence. Countries are a product of "rebirth," however, like the statues formed from material that already existed. The horses themselves are

unusual because they ultimately defy this formula, continually moved from place-to-place all the while maintaining their classical form and beauty.

Using the Impressionistic techniques found in the previous poems, Lowell depicts the Romans as a decadent culture grown cruel in their penchant for military glory. Like the opening of “Sea-Blue,” the speaker offers a vivid description of the sky and position of the light: “The blue sky of Italy; the blue sky of Rome. Sunlight pouring white and clear from the wide-stretched sky. Sunlight sliding softly over white marble, lying in jasmine circles in cool porticoes, striking sharply upon roofs and domes, recoiling before straight façades of grey granite, foiled and beaten by the deep halls of temples” (124). Rome is visually idealized. Through language that appeals directly to the senses, the narrator evokes feelings of warmth, permanence, safety, and cleanliness. Imperially placed above this scene on the Arch of Nero are the four gilded horses, treading “the marbles of Rome beneath their feet” (125). From this lofty place, the speaker begins her descent into the streets of the city, a metropolis populated by the lavishly bored rich and merchants plying their trade among donkey-carts (126-28). A citizen’s comment “that Titus has conquered Judea” indicates that the action takes place circa 73 A. D.⁷⁵ As the scene progresses, Lowell depicts the Romans as a bored yet bloodthirsty people who demand martial glory. After the fall of Jerusalem, the soldier’s chant “back to Rome with a victor’s spoils, with a victor’s wreath on every head, and Judah broken is dead, dead!” (133). Although the state of the Empire seems to require moral judgment, some type of ethical assessment from the narrator, the narrator remains objective in her description. The implication is that the history of Rome, its fall into decadence and ruination, is already well-documented. Lowell’s rendering ends with a victory parade honoring Titus and Emperor Vespasian. Maintaining the emotional vibrancy of the moment, she transitions into a musical interlude.

The brief, italicized section that divides “Rome” and “Constantinople” is remarkably cinematic, a description of a natural scene and the type of music playing in the background. Entitled “Pavanne to a Brass Orchestra,” it calls attention to the theatrical, dramatic tone of “The Bronze Horses.” The “dance” the narrator describes takes place in nature: “Water falls from the sky, and green-fanged lightning mouths the heavens. The Earth rolls upon itself, incessantly creating morning and evening. The moon calls to the waters, swinging them forward and back, and the sun draws closer and as rhythmically recedes. . . .” (139-40). The raw, churning elements are in themselves musical, “a single cymbal-crash of fire, and for an instant the concerted music ceases. But it resumes—Earth, Air, and Water, and out of it rise the metals, unconsumed. Brazen cymbals, trumpets of silver, bells of bronze” (140). The chaos of creation is cacophonous, but Lowell suggests that it is from this that the order and stability the bronze horses represent was made.

The sections on Constantinople, Venice, and then Venice for a second time after a brief sojourn in France, follow many of the same imagistic and thematic patterns established in the section on Rome. In each of their geographical positions, Lowell describes the statues as if in motion. While mounted in the Byzantine hippodrome, “above the Emperor’s balcony, the bronze horses move quietly forward, and the sun outlines the great muscles of their lifted legs” (150). After the sacking of Constantinople by Doge Enrico Dandolo in 1204, the horses were moved to Venice.⁷⁶ The narrator describes them in their position in the façade of Saint Mark’s, where they remained until Napoleon took them to Paris in 1807:

Four horses parading in front of a splendid church. Four ancient horses with ear pointed forward, listening. One foot is raised, they advance without moving. To what do they listen? To the serenades they have heard so often? *Cavatine*,

canzonette, dance songs, hymns, for six hundred years the songs of Venice have drifted past them, lightly, as the wings of pigeons. And month by month the old moon has sailed over them, as she did in Constantinople, as she did in Rome (188).

The concept of motion is complex in “The Bronze Horses,” referring to visual illusions as well as the forces of time. The movement of battle, of song, of people walking by in the street are all “absorbed” into the life of the statues as if they can record and remember. Contrary to the passing of the stage-coaches and their gregarious pilots, the *quadriga* resists the violent associations of change.

Given Lowell’s seemingly conservative approach to concepts such as change and tradition, it is perhaps ironic that her work inspired radical shifts in aesthetic trends. The reaction from scholars to her work, however, has been relatively supine. Many of the thematic complexities buried within the poems that comprise *Can Grande’s Castle* have remained unexplored. Critics have primarily focused their attention on Lowell’s technical innovations. Polyphonic Prose is an important mode for many reasons, but part of its legacy is that it was an essential component in the emergence of American Literary Minimalism. The axioms of Imagism form the foundation of austere literature, and Lowell was instrumental in transitioning those concepts from the realm of poetry into prose. Her work is not as efficient as the fiction of Hemingway and Raymond Carver, but it is similar in that it is highly allusive and implicative.

Notes

¹ John Livingston Lowes, *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919) and William Morrison Patterson, *The Rhythm of Prose: An Experimental Investigation of Individual Difference in the Sense of Rhythm* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), p. ix.

² Richard Aldington and others, *Some Imagist Poets 1916: An Annual Anthology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), p. xii.

³ Richard Aldington and others, *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), p. vi.

⁴ Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York: MacMillan, 1920), p. 321.

⁵ Amy Lowell, *Can Grande's Castle* (New York: MacMillan, 1918), pp. x-xi. All subsequent references are to the same edition.

⁶ Quoted in Jean Gould, *Amy: The World of Amy Lowell and Imagist Movement* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975), p. 38.

⁷ Amy Lowell, "The Bombardment," *Poetry* 5, no. 2 (1914): 61.

⁸ Patterson, *The Rhythm of Prose*, p. 13. Lowell read the first edition of Patterson's study and ultimately influenced the revisions presented in the second. Lowell's description of her first meeting with Patterson illustrates her considerable moxie:

A friend sent me Dr. William Morrison Patterson's "Rhythms of Prose." It was the first edition, for the second contains material changes and a more comprehending attitude. The chapter on *vers libre* was enough to excite the vindictive ire of any practitioner of the form. I met Dr. Patterson and, throwing

caution to the winds, gave him what our up-country cousins call “a piece of my mind.” It was a generous piece, but to my astonishment he swallowed it with the utmost goodwill; and, after tilting at an enemy, I found myself shaking hands with a friend.

Amy Lowell, “Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry,” *The Musical Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (1920): 127.

⁹ Lowell, “Some Musical Analogies,” p. 128, and Lowell, *Can Grande’s Castle*, p. xv. Lowell rationalizes her decision to describe Polyphonic Prose at length, stating that it is necessary “because, as all the poems in this volume are written in it, some knowledge of how to approach it is necessary if one is to understand them.”

¹⁰ Quoted in S. Foster Damon, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), p. 479.

¹¹ Glenn Hughes, *Imagism & The Imagists* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1972), p. 39.

¹² Richard Aldington and others, *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology*, pp. vi-vii.

¹³ Hughes, *Imagism & The Imagists*, p. 40.

¹⁴ Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, p. 247.

¹⁵ James D. Brasch and Joseph Sigman, *Hemingway’s Library: A Composite Record*, 2000 Electronic Edition, John F. Kennedy Library, p. 231.

<[http://www.jfklibrary.org/NR/rdonlyres/D809DDAD-CCC6-4C97-8505-](http://www.jfklibrary.org/NR/rdonlyres/D809DDAD-CCC6-4C97-8505-9AC5E224200D/19103/hemingwayslibrary99.pdf)

9AC5E224200D/19103/hemingwayslibrary99.pdf.>. Accessed Sept. 25, 2010, 9:15 P. M.

¹⁶ Richard Aldington and others, *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology*, p. vi.

¹⁷ Winfield Townley Scott, “Amy Lowell after Ten Years,” *New England Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1935): 327.

¹⁸ James W. Tupper, "The Poetry of Amy Lowell," *The Sewanee Review* 28, no. 1 (1920): 52.

¹⁹ Harriet Monroe, "Miss Lowell and Polyphonic Prose," review of *Can Grande's Castle* by Amy Lowell, *Poetry* 13, no. 2 (1918): 20.

²⁰ Anonymous, untitled rev. of *Can Grande's Castle* by Amy Lowell, *The North American Review* 209, no. 762 (1919): 711.

²¹ D. H. Lawrence and Amy Lowell, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence and Amy Lowell: 1914-1925* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1985), p. 140, n77.

²² Damon, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*, p. 467.

²³ R. W. B. Lewis, *Dante: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2001), p. 131.

²⁴ Lewis, *Dante: A Life*, pp. 163-64.

²⁵ Lowell, "Some Musical Analogies," p. 154.

²⁶ For the original publication of the poem, see Amy Lowell, "Sea-Blue and Blood-Red," *The North American Review* 205, no. 737 (1917): 586-602.

²⁷ This is a term introduced by James Nagel in *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism*. He defined it as a technique in which an author invests objects with representational meaning that does not carry the universal associations of a symbol:

Related to Crane's use of color images are figures often described as symbols but which actually function in a way similar to the objective correlative. As symbols generally point outside of a work to meanings established by historical precedent, Crane's figures, which might best be called "imagistic correlatives," express internal meanings drawn from the minds of the characters. These are

individualized, associational meanings, pertaining to one experience only; the same image, used in another context, could have different values.

Imagism and Impressionism are profoundly related. Authors working within both movements sought to render in words a brief moment in time. They emphasize sensorial rather than intellectual experience, so there is little to no description of what a character thinks about in that instant. Creating an imagistic correlative is a vehicle for communicating specific emotions, but the same color or object can take on a different meaning when placed in another context. Lowell uses this device frequently in *Can Grande's Castle*. Nagel, *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), p. 150.

²⁸ Damon, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*, p. 473.

²⁹ Based on Fletcher's account, Glenn Richard Ruibley wrote that Lowell was a " 'tireless scholar' ." See Ruibley, *The Thorn of a Rose: Amy Lowell Reconsidered* (Hamden: Archon, 1975), p. 141, and Horace Gregory, *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet In Her Time* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1958), p. 32.

³⁰ While they had met some years earlier, their affair likely began in 1799 when Nelson was stationed in Naples. See Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), p. 324.

³¹ Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 157.

³² See A. T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson, The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1899), p. 322, and Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 548.

³³ The letter is reprinted in Robert T. Self, "The Correspondence of Amy Lowell and Barrett Wendell, 1915-1919," *The New England Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1974): 77.

³⁴ Quoted in Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 389.

³⁵ Horatio Nelson, *The Letters of Lord Nelson to Lady Hamilton: With a Supplement of Interesting Letters by Distinguished Characters*, vol. 1 (London: Thomas Lovewell & Co., 1814), pp. 133-34, 136.

³⁶ Mahan, *The Life of Nelson*. 319. At the time Lowell wrote “Sea-Blue and Blood-Red,” Mahan’s biography was the most recent.

³⁷ Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 309.

³⁸ Mahan, *The Life of Nelson*, p. 320.

³⁹ See Betsey Fremantle’s diary entry quoted in Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 359.

⁴⁰ Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, pp. 291-303.

⁴¹ Amy Lowell, “Guns as Keys: and the Great Gate Swings,” *The Seven Arts* 2 (Aug, 1917): 428-51.

⁴² Lowell, “Some Musical Analogies,” p. 134.

⁴³ Gould, *Amy: The World of Amy Lowell*, p. 237.

⁴⁴ Francis L. Hawks, *Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan* (Stroud: Nonsuch Publishing, 2005), p. 92.

⁴⁵ William Leonard Schwartz, “A Study of Amy Lowell’s Far Eastern Verse,” *Modern Language Notes* 43, no. 3 (1928): 147-48.

⁴⁶ Jocelyn Bouquillard, *Hokusai’s Mount Fuji: The Complete Views in Color*, trans. Mark Getlein (New York: Abrams, 2007), p. 48.

⁴⁷ Bernardin de Saint Pierre, *Paul and Virginia*, trans. Helen Maria Williams (Doylestown: Wildside Press, 2010), p. 52.

⁴⁸ Saint Pierre, *Paul and Virginia*, p. 100.

⁴⁹ Saint Gereon was a third-century Roman soldier who, along with 290 of his men, was executed by Emperor Maximian because he “refused to worship pagan gods before battle.”

Annette Sandoval, *The Directory of Saints: A Concise Guide to Patron Saints* (New York: Signet, 1996), p. 154.

⁵⁰ Saint Pierre, *Paul and Virginia*, p. 104.

⁵¹ Hawks, *Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan*, p. 114.

⁵² Matsuo Bashō, *The Sound of Water*, trans. Sam Hamill (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), p. 6.

⁵³ Julian Bicknell, *Hiroshige in Tokyo: The Floating World of Edo* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1994), p. 145.

⁵⁴ “Nocturne—Blue and Silver—Battersea Bridge,” Mr. Whistler’s Art: Hunterian Museum & Art Gallery, Glasgow University, <http://www.mr-whistlers-art.info/art/paintings/city_sea/battersea_bridge.shtml>. Accessed Sept. 17, 2010, 9:48 P. M. For a reproduction of “Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge,” see Richard Dormont and Margaret F. MacDonald, *James McNeill Whistler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), p. 130.

⁵⁵ Bicknell, *Hiroshige in Tokyo*, pp. 144-46.

⁵⁶ See “Nocturne—Grey and Silver—Chelsea Embankment,” The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler: On-Line Edition, Glasgow University, <<http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/artwork/artimage/?filename=y205&>>. Accessed Sept. 27, 2010, 10:33 P. M. The composition of Whistler’s piece is similar to a fan print by Hiroshige entitled “The Banks of the Sumida River,” or “Sumida Ryōgan.” For a full-color reproduction, see Rupert Faulkner, *Hiroshige Fan Prints* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), p. 85.

⁵⁷ Dorment and MacDonald, *James McNeill Whistler*, p. 90.

⁵⁸ Dorment and MacDonald, *James McNeill Whistler*, pp 120-21.

⁵⁹ Amy Lowell, "Hedge Island: A Retrospect and a Prophecy," *The North American Review* 208, no. 753 (1918): 261-68.

⁶⁰ Harold Esdaile Malet and Nimrod, *Annals of the Road: Or, Notes on Mail and Stage Coaching in Great Britain* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1876), pp. 25-26.

⁶¹ Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars: An International History 1803-1815* (New York: Viking, 2007), p. 357.

⁶² Malet and Nimrod, *Annals of the Road*, p. 37.

⁶³ Malet and Nimrod, *Annals of the Road*, pp. 59-60.

⁶⁴ See in Malet and Nimrod, for example, "The Devonport Mail, Near Amsbury, Going Post Through a Drift of Snow, On Tuesday Dec. 27 1836" and "The Birmingham Mail, Near Aylesbury: The Guard, W. Price, Proceeding With the Bags, On Monday Dec. 26th 1836." Malet and Nimrod, *Annals of the Road*, p. 150.

⁶⁵ Malet and Nimrod, *Annals of the Road*, p. 173.

⁶⁶ The church at Thunor is the burial place of the unknown sailor and, according to Walter Jerrold, his gravestone says

A generous but Unfortunate Sailor,
Who was barbarously murder'd on Hindhead
On Sept. 24, 1876
By three Villains,
After he had liberally treated them,
And promised them his further Assistance,

On the road to Portsmouth.

Walter Jerrold, *Surrey* (New York: Dutton, 1901), p. 41.

⁶⁷ Thomas Wright, *Hind Head or the English Switzerland and its Literary and Historical Associations* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1898), p. 13.

⁶⁸ Wright, *Hind Head*, p. 13

⁶⁹ Henry Downes Miles, *Pugilistica: The History of British Boxing*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1906), pp. 252-55. Miles mistakenly refers to Copthorne Common as “Cophthall Common.”

⁷⁰ See Miles, *Pugilistica*, pp. 167-181 for information on Pearce, and pp. 328-63 for Miles’s piece on Randall.

⁷¹ Malet and Nimrod, *Annals of the Road*, pp. 138-39.

⁷² Charles Freeman, *The Horses of St. Mark’s: A Story of Triumph in Byzantium, Paris and Venice* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2004), p. 175. Freeman wrote that this was discovered in the eighteenth century.

⁷³ Michael Jacoff, *The Horses of San Marco and the Quadriga of the Lord* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 6. Jacoff bases his assertion about the horses being brought to their perch in the Hippodrome by Theodosius II from Chios on chapter eighty-four of the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*: “The four gilt horses that stand above the Hippodrome came from the island of Chios under Theodosius II (408-50).” See *Constantinople in the Early Eighth Century: The Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, ed. Averil Cameron and Judith Herrin (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), p. 161.

⁷⁴ Freeman, *The Horses of St. Mark’s*, p. 257.

⁷⁵ Menashe Har-El, "Jerusalem & Judea: Roads and Fortifications," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 44, no. 1 (1981), p. 18.

⁷⁶ Freeman, *The Horses of St. Mark's*, pp. 82-83.

CHAPTER 3

L' ANCIENNE: ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S *IN OUR TIME*

From the time Ernest Hemingway was a teenager in Oak Park, Illinois, he was an active writer. While his early work was influenced by Ring Lardner, so much so that the young Hemingway referred to himself as “Ring Lardner Jr.” in his school’s newspaper,¹ he was already drafting stories with complex allusions. His early tendencies were reinforced during the period he spent as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star* and the *Toronto Star*, working for editors who expected concision. The introductory rules on the style sheet at the *Kansas City Star* demanded that its reporters “use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative,” directives that Hemingway applied throughout his artistic life.² After his service in the American Red Cross during World War I, he continued to refine his methods by attempting to create fiction he could sell to the *Saturday Evening Post*. Upon moving to Paris, the final phase of his “apprenticeship” commenced and he began to compose the aggressive, declarative prose for which he is known. Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, and their fellow Imagists were significant to Hemingway’s development, directly and indirectly encouraging him to focus on images and objects rather than literary abstractions. Lowell’s Polyphonic Prose was also important because it provided a clear illustration of how prose could be merged with poetry, a fusing of genres evident in the interchapters that comprise “IN OUR TIME” (1923) and *in our time* (1924). Synthesizing lessons and techniques learned from a diverse assemblage of stylistic

masters, Hemingway wrote *In Our Time* (1925), a seminal work in American Literary Minimalism.

In addition to his considerable contribution to American literature, Hemingway articulated some of the theoretical concepts that inform Minimalism. In *Death in the Afternoon*, he discussed his Iceberg Principle in detail, explaining that important ideas and events can be left out of a story but maintain an intellectual presence if the author has a concrete idea of what has been withheld.³ Twenty-six years later, Hemingway reiterated his original stance, maintaining that “anything you can omit that you know you still have in the writing and its quality will show. When a writer omits things he does not know, they show like holes in his writing.”⁴ Imagists had already employed this principle in their poetry, striving to suggest the importance of events and concepts not explicitly described. Following the Impressionists, they composed verse that displayed an adherence to the principles of “compression, to the direct presentation of a scene,” and “sharp restrictions in length,”⁵ qualities that are essential to the development of suggestiveness. Linda Welshimer Wagner observed the “montage effect” used in *In Our Time*, the unrelenting juxtaposition of concrete images that gives the collection a rapid pace, as Hemingway’s “most obvious tribute to Imagism.”⁶ The Iceberg Principle is a rudimentary concept at work in *In Our Time* and much of the austere fiction written over the last century.

Before he was a journalist, an afternoon guest in the Paris apartment of Gertrude Stein, or a bullfight aficionado, Hemingway’s Minimalist aesthetic was in its formative stage. His earliest extant fiction indicates that his style was developing while he was still a student in the western Chicago suburbs. Unsurprisingly, Hemingway’s juvenilia does not reflect the craftsmanship demonstrated in the work he produced seven years later, but it shows his promise. He did not think highly of the pieces printed in Oak Park High School’s *Tabula*, namely “Judgment of

Manitou,” “A Matter of Colour,” and “Sepi Jingan.” He wrote to one of his early biographers, Charles A. Fenton, that his high school poems and stories were “shit.”⁷ Constance Cappel Montgomery disagreed with Hemingway’s assessment, however, maintaining that the tales “show that he had formed the basis of his style” and that he “had chosen his subject matter of violence and manliness before his World War I experiences.”⁸ The narratives also demonstrate a degree of self-effacement; the narrator does not moralize or explain “the point.” David Marut observed that the pieces include “relatively little of the intrusive authorial commentary that might mark a novice writer” and noted that Hemingway allows characters “to speak for themselves through localized dialogue.”⁹ The narratives reflect an indebtedness to Lardner and Mark Twain,¹⁰ but they also intimate that Hemingway was perhaps exposed to a variety of storytelling traditions as well. The dialogue in “Judgment” is often contrived and Hemingway’s distrust of adjectives had not yet developed, but his plot reflects an interest in the life and death themes that run throughout the oral and written histories of the Lake Superior region.

The Hemingway family spent much of their summers in northern Michigan, and they were close with the Native American population that lived nearby. While all three high school stories contain violent subject matter, “Sepi Jingan” and “Judgment of Manitou” suggest that Hemingway may have been familiar with Great Lakes mythology. In *Legends of the Land of Lakes*, George Francis relays tales of murder, betrayal, and romance. In one episode, he describes how in 1722 a trader had left his wife and offspring behind at an “old French fort” on the shores of Lake Superior in order to “make his annual purchases,” placing his family in the care of a “native.” In the father’s absence, the caretaker makes “unholy advances” on the wife and, having been rebuffed, murders both her and the children. The killer “escaped and went to another country,” eventually settling with a different tribe. When he drunkenly admits what he

has done, “several of his indignant comrades held their guns to his head. One fired; and that was the end of the villain.”¹¹ In both Francis and Hemingway’s narratives, punishment results from a transcendent obligation to justice.

Hemingway’s “Judgment of Manitou” illustrates a similar, seemingly supernatural cycle of crime and retribution. Suspecting that his trapping partner, Dick Haywood, has stolen his wallet, Pierre, a Cree Indian, enacts a violent plan for retribution. While out checking his line, Haywood is caught in Pierre’s snare and eaten by timber wolves. While his victim is being devoured, Pierre realizes that the “tief” is in fact a red squirrel. He races out to save his erstwhile friend but is caught in the bear trap Haywood “had come to tend.” Instead of suffering the same fate as his cohort, he reaches for his rifle, implying that he has elected to kill himself rather than be eaten. Before he dies, he attributes his demise to the “judgment of Manitou,” the supreme being of the Cree.¹² “Judgment” demonstrates that Hemingway was a precocious Minimalist, well-versed in the technique of using allusions and historical references as a means to add depth.

Meaningful, suggestive imagery is almost entirely absent from Hemingway’s high school prose, but his poems are a different matter. During their senior year, Hemingway and a classmate named Fred Wilcoxon co-authored three pieces that reflect the attributes of Imagism and Impressionism. In the first, entitled “The Tackle,” a self-effacing speaker synesthetically and kinetically describes the momentary sensations of making a football tackle: “A heaving, gasping chest, / Alert, shifting mud-stained legs. / A quick pull, a thrust, a headlong dive at a / Group of rushing legs.”¹³ Hemingway’s grouping of fragmentary sensations, held together only by the progression of the player’s physical movement, is reminiscent of Hamlin Garland’s and Amy Lowell’s prose-poems. The point of view Hemingway and Wilcoxon employed is also interesting

because it draws the audience into the experience, creating and sustaining the emotion that fuels the intensity of the act. It is a technique Hemingway frequently uses in *In Our Time*.

In the two years after he graduated from high school, Hemingway experienced life-changing events that shaped both the content and style of his fiction. In October of 1917, he left for Kansas City and began a six-month tenure as a cub reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. The editors emphasized the importance of concision and, as Carlos Baker explained,

to work on the paper was to learn how to write “declarative sentences,” how to “avoid hackneyed adjectives,” and how “to tell an interesting narrative.” There was also a stylebook which the young reporters were supposed to study. It said that the key to fine reporting was to “use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English, not forgetting to strive for smoothness. Be positive, not negative.”¹⁴

Hemingway did not receive bylines for his articles at the *Star*, however, so it is unknown to what degree he absorbed these axioms.

Perhaps inspired by a coworker at the *Star* named Theodore “Ted” Brumback, Hemingway ended his tenure at the Kansas City newspaper in late April of 1918 and joined the Red Cross Ambulance corps. He returned to Oak Park for a short time and then began his journey to Europe on May 11.¹⁵ One of his primary duties was to deliver chocolate and cigarettes to men at the front as a means to maintain their morale. While responsible for a canteen in Fossalta di Piave on July 8, 1918, Hemingway sustained multiple injuries to his legs from Austrian mortar and machine-gun fire. Despite his wounds, it is reported that he attempted to assist one of his fellow comrades during the attack. Hemingway was sent to Milan and falsely thought to have been the first American wounded during the war. During his convalescence, he

began a romance with a nurse named Agnes von Kurowsky, a relationship that would heavily influence his fiction. Once he had adequately healed enough to travel, Hemingway sailed for New York on January 4, 1919.¹⁶ When he returned home, he resumed his commitment to becoming a writer.

Hemingway's first post-war prose efforts were about as successful as his high school material, but in 1919 he authored a series of sketches entitled "Crossroads—An Anthology." Begun in November, the pieces are based on figures Hemingway observed in the area of Horton Bay, Michigan.¹⁷ Perhaps the most noteworthy of the group is the first, "Pauline Snow." The plot is relatively simple. Pauline Snow, "the only beautiful girl we had out at the bay," has her reputation ruined because she likes to take evening walks with a man named Art Simons. Some of the townsmen spot them and "complain." In the end, Pauline is sent away to the "correction school" and Art marries "one of the Jenkins girls." As Michael Reynolds observed, the vignette seems heavily influenced by Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*.¹⁸ Pauline is said to be "like an Easter Lily coming up straight and lithe and beautiful out of a dung heap," reminiscent of Crane's description of Maggie as a girl who "blossomed in a mud puddle."¹⁹ Maggie's seducer, Pete, is paralleled by Art, a callous and brutish man interested in Pauline only for her body. The direct, declarative sentences, as well as some of the details Hemingway employs, suggest that he had read Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, published earlier in 1919.²⁰ Art appears similar to Wing Biddlebaum, the protagonist in Anderson's "Hands," in that he "couldn't come to most places at the Bay" and has "thick blunt fingers . . . always touching" Pauline "when he talked."²¹ Hemingway's prose is highly implicative: Art has obviously done something ignominious, probably of a sexual nature, to earn the ire of the town. Like so many of Hemingway's later stories, the plot of "Pauline Snow" is in part shaped by omitted events that

are implied to have happened before the action begins. Although Hemingway had also written trite, florid tales such as “The Mercenaries—A Story” in 1919, he was beginning to embrace the central tendencies of Minimalism, particularly in his continued use of allusion.

The two years following Hemingway’s return from the war were aesthetically and experientially transitional. Between the time he returned to Oak Park in 1919 and left for Paris in December of 1921, he sold features to the *Toronto Star*, including a clever story about receiving a free shave,²² and married his first wife, Hadley Richardson. He quarreled with his mother, Grace, who told Ernest in a July, 1920 missive that he needed to “come to yourself, cease your lazy loafing, and pleasure seeking. . . .”²³ Once he and Hadley had moved into their first Paris apartment on January 9, 1922, Ernest began to write what Carlos Baker called “short, impressionistic pieces, where every word must count for itself and for its effect on others.”²⁴ Hemingway had composed brief, sensorial verse in high school but was moving toward a more reportorial approach.

In March of 1922, Hemingway introduced himself to Gertrude Stein, commencing a complex relationship that helped determine his approach to the epistemic parameters of his stories. Richard Hasbany wrote that Stein introduced the young writer to her “technique of rendering subjective states of characters through repetition.” The resulting effect is that “the repetitious phrase of Stein captures a rhythm of imprecise thought and perception, of the mind hitting and missing and hitting again what it really sees and truly feels.”²⁵ Hemingway’s exposure to Impressionist art and literature may have also have planted some of these same ideas within his aesthetic consciousness. In addition to the pieces he viewed at the Art Institute of Chicago and in the major Paris museums, Hemingway was familiar with the work of Hamlin Garland, Ambrose Bierce, and Stephen Crane.²⁶ Using techniques he was exposed to in their

fiction, Hemingway exploits the fundamental difference between experiencing and understanding in many of the pieces that comprise *In Our Time*.

Hemingway's opinion of Stein changed in the decades after he lived in Paris, but he consistently expressed admiration for Ezra Pound.²⁷ Along with the central Imagist principles of precision and suggestiveness, Pound's primary contribution to Hemingway's development was in his emphasis upon the importance of linking images with specific emotions. Scott Donaldson asserted that "Pound taught both [T. S.] Eliot and Hemingway how to recreate emotions, not through a general ooze of feeling, but through specific concrete images." For Eliot, this was the concept of the "objective correlative."²⁸ In Hemingway's fiction, narrators rarely supply direct information about feeling. Images and actions are reported objectively, as "truly" as possible, but Hemingway is still able to generate emotional depth through implication. Experience and sensations rarely have a distinct unity, however, because they are innately volatile.

Although it achieves unity because of its thematic and stylistic continuity, *In Our Time* is essentially an arrangement of fragments. Harry Levin wrote that many of Hemingway's early pieces were rejected because they were "nothing but sketches and anecdotes," but Levin concluded that "fragments of truth, after all, are the best that a writer can offer; and, as Hemingway has said, ' . . . Any [sic] part you make will represent the whole if it's made truly'."²⁹ *In Our Time* has a varied and somewhat convoluted publication history, and it is a fitting illustration of the accretive nature of Hemingway's image-centered prose. The first pieces were six vignettes that originally appeared in the Spring, 1923 edition of *The Little Review* under the heading "IN OUR TIME."³⁰ These later served as chapters one, two, three, four, five, and nine of the 1925 and 1930 editions of *In Our Time*. Hemingway combined them with twelve others in assembling the 1924 collection entitled *in our time*. In 1925, Hemingway released the Paris

version of *In Our Time* using two tales that had previously been in print in his first book, *Three Stories and Ten Poems*, “Out of Season” and “My Old Man,” and added them to ten narratives primarily written in 1924.

Since 1930, *In Our Time* has begun with a harrowing, prose-poetic vignette called “On the Quai at Smyrna.”³¹ In many ways a non-traditional story, it has no discernible plot. A man is speaking to the narrator, recalling a scene from the burning of Smyrna during the Greek and Turkish War, a conflict Hemingway observed and wrote about in 1922.³² The narrative technique is somewhat complex, as it is a third-person narrator who is conveying the events described by another man who, given his diction, is likely British. The vignette is Minimalistic, a recounting of visual and auditory details seemingly remembered in fragments. “On the Quai” is as much about the nature of memory as it is about the horrors of civilian life during a war. In an interview with George Plimpton published in the *Paris Review*, Hemingway included Hieronymous Bosch among his influences, and the opening image of “On the Quai” is reminiscent of the Dutch painter’s nightmarish scenes of hell.³³ In an emotionally deadened and reportorial manner, the protagonist recalls that “the strange thing was . . . how they screamed every night at midnight. I do not know why they screamed at that time. We were in the harbor and they were all on the pier and at midnight they started screaming. We used to turn the searchlight on them to quiet them. That always did the trick.”³⁴ The speaker seems cavalier about what he is describing, a perspective Louis H. Leiter described as a “factual, businesslike, apparently unfeeling tone, playing over the horror and grotesque.”³⁵ The seeming flippancy of the last sentence does not result from indifference. “On the Quai” is essentially a first-person retrospective narration relayed in third-person, and the implication is not that the man is cruel and uncaring but that he has not yet emotionally come to terms with what he has witnessed.

The deadpan, detached voice of “On the Quai” is one that Hemingway uses frequently in *In Our Time*. The two prose-poems dealing with Mons, interchapters III and IV, are narrated in the same tone. Charles A. Fenton identified the inspiration for the voice as Hemingway’s friend Edward “Chink” Dorman-Smith, who served in the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers during World War I,³⁶ and this likely explains the use of British terms such as “topping” and “potted.” Beyond the careless attitude with which the speaker approaches the efficient killing of German combatants, these images of easy success, the “perfect barricade,” later a “perfect obstacle” (37), serve as an ironic reminder that the “glorious” gains won at Mons were unusual in the course of what turned out to be a terrible war.³⁷ The historical context illustrates a theme that runs throughout the collection: human experience is essentially entropic.

The Mons vignettes point to orderly beginnings whereas the other interchapters, particularly those based on the Greco-Turkish conflict, tend to focus on chaotic events. Hemingway reported on the evacuation of the Greeks from Adrianople, and Fenton has written an extensive account of how Hemingway trimmed away the extraneous, emotive language of his journalism in order to form the grim images in Chapter II.³⁸ Fenton also articulated one of the primary effects that Minimalist authors achieve by relaying sensory details through an non-intrusive narrator: the intensity of the “horror was far greater” because the audience was required to reach their “own conclusions.”³⁹ The final four sentences are the most provocative: “Women and kids were in the carts crouched with mattresses, mirrors, sewing machines, bundles. There was a woman having a kid with a young girl holding a blanket over her and crying. Scared sick looking at it. It rained all through the evacuation” (21). Like his counterpart in Ivan Turgenev’s *Sportsman’s Sketches*, the narrator objectively renders a circumstance that demands a moral response but offers little or no direction as to what it should be.⁴⁰ The closest the narrator comes

to making himself a part of the image is when he says “scared sick looking at it.” The referent is ambiguous and could be the speaker or the young girl. Hemingway wrote about his personal response to the scenes he saw on the Karagatch road outside of Adrianople. After marveling at the ease with which his acquaintance Shorty Wornall, an American cameraman, was able to fall asleep after filming a burning village, Hemingway wrote that “I couldn’t get the horror of that twenty mile long procession out of my mind, and I had seen some dreadful things that day.”⁴¹ Perhaps as a means to achieve a type of closure, at least within the parameters of the collection, Hemingway wrote two more pieces based on his observations of central Europe.

Chapter V and the final vignette in *In Our Time*, “L’Envoi,” are vivid illustrations of retribution and punishment deferred. In the first, the horrors of the Karagatch road have consequences for six Greek ministers who are lined up and shot. Hemingway did not witness the execution but likely derived the piece from a story published in the Paris *Tribune*.⁴² After his army had been destroyed by the Turks, King Constantine of Greece fled to England, abdicating in favor of his son George, and left his cabinet ministers to defend themselves against the new military leadership. England and America, whose governments and citizens had considerable economic interests in Greece, did little to stop the violence against the former regime.⁴³ Hemingway dramatizes the execution using images reminiscent of Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” his narrator recalling that “there were pools of water in the courtyard. There were wet dead leaves on the paving of the courtyard. It rained hard. All the shutters of the hospital were nailed shut.”⁴⁴ The falling, pooling rain and the sealed hospital serve as imagistic correlatives, juxtaposed with a “minister who was sick with typhoid” and crouches against the wall when he is shot, unable to stand (51). The scene generates moral and emotional complexity, the pathetic end of the ministers placed against King Constantine’s blithe new life in an English garden.

Hemingway wrote in a letter to Pound that “L’Envoi” was based on an account from Wornall and that it brought an end to the Greco-Turkish war material:

The refugees leave Thrace, due to the Greek ministers, who are shot. The whole thing closes with the talk with the King of Greece and his Queen in their garden, (just written), which shows the king all right. The last sentence in it is-----Like all Greeks what he really wanted was to get to America.-----My pal Shorty, movie operator with me in Thrace, just brings the dope on the King.

Edifying.⁴⁵

Constantine’s sentiments about the deceased ministers displays an ironic emotional detachment, a state Hemingway repeatedly describes in the collection, telling the narrator “I think he [Plastiras] did right though shooting those chaps. If Kerensky had shot a few men things might have been altogether different. Of course the great thing in this sort of an affair is not to be shot oneself!” (157). Hemingway shows remarkable control in this sketch, allowing the repugnance of the King’s figurative myopia to speak for itself.

The precision with which Hemingway molds his narrative voices allows him to communicate emotional depth in even the most compressed sketches. Fear is ubiquitous in *In Our Time*, and Hemingway deftly conveys it through the manipulation of perspective. As the *Mons* inter-chapters show, the implications of Hemingway’s fiction depend upon the way an image is described. Recalling an evening moving along the road on the way to Champagne, the speaker in Chapter I bluntly reveals that “everybody was drunk” (13). The result of the men’s over-imbibing seems to have been a mix of hunger, paranoia, and unease. Nick Adams, perhaps Hemingway’s most well-known protagonist, says in “A Way You’ll Never Be” that he “was stinking in every attack,” an admission that he was afraid.⁴⁶ The narrator in Chapter I says that he

was “kitchen corporal” and remembers being told by an adjutant to put out his kitchen fire lest the enemy see the light. His drunkenness has affected the quality of his memory as the only reaction he can summon to what happened is that it was “funny going along that road” (13). The suggestion is that it was “funny” in the sense that the men were on edge, but it is also a bland adjective that shows the speaker lacks commitment. He is, in other words, being cautiously imprecise. Without light, they are moving through the night without a sense of certainty or direction. The implication is that they have been drinking in order to combat a sense of foreboding. Hemingway omits the term “afraid” but implies that it is the mental state that governs the scene.⁴⁷

In some cases, an important yet omitted term can be derived from manuscript evidence: “Soldier’s Home” provides such an example. In the version that appears in *In Our Time*, Harold Krebs arrives in Oklahoma to find “a world that is corrupt, artificial, and hypocritical and in which he no longer feels at home.”⁴⁸ The title is ironic; Krebs’s home now inspires unease. The “hysteria” with which the town had at first responded to the returning men has faded, and when he feels the need to talk about what has happened, “no one wanted to hear about it” (69). Paradoxically, the isolation Krebs feels in relationship to his neighbors is matched by the fervor of his mother and father. His mom’s religious exuberance and overbearing nature lead him to say that he does not love her, or anyone, although he later recants. The narrative ends without resolution.

In the first draft of “Soldier’s Home,” Hemingway wrote two sentences that use terms that are crucial to the intellectual core of the tale. Upon returning home, the narrator says that “the war was well over. The reaction to the war time hysteria feelings had set in.” He goes on to describe how “Krebs knew he was a hero. At least he had done for a long time what the other

~~men~~ soldiers from his town had done a little.”⁴⁹ “Hysteria” and “heroism” are important concepts in the story of Harold Krebs, but the latter does not appear. His feelings of loss and purposelessness, despite the excellence of his service, are exacerbated by the zealousness of his family and home town. He has sacrificed something of himself in the war, perhaps experienced a significant “psychic shock,” but he receives no recognition and no empathy. In the end he seems disgusted by his lack of fortitude, paradoxically illustrating that home-life can sometimes be more emotionally harrowing than a battlefield. Most troubling, however, is his admitted inability to love.

On the other hand, Hemingway seldom presents love as a positive, or even mildly curative, emotion: it more often leads to feelings of disaffection, confusion, and resentment. “A Very Short Story” is a bitter vignette about a young soldier recovering from a war injury in Padua, Italy. He has a brief love affair with his nurse, Luz, who shares his hospital bed and prays with him in the Duomo that they might one day be married. After the armistice, they conclude that he should return home to America to find a job and prepare for a pleasing domestic existence but argue over the fact that Luz has elected to stay in Europe. She ultimately travels to Pordenone, where she is wooed by a major in the Italian Arditi. She writes a condescending letter to her former lover to end their relationship but is later snubbed by the major. In a parallel event, the young man contracts gonorrhea from a “sales girl in a loop department store” in the back seat of a taxi (66). When organizing *in our time*, Hemingway indicated in a letter to Pound that the final scene in “A Very Short Story” served as a reminder of the ingloriousness of the war: “The war starts clear and noble just like it did, Mons etc., gets close and blurred and finished with the feller who goes home and gets clap.”⁵⁰ The shabbiness of the ending also does much to mitigate the romantic sentimentality of the first half of the sketch.

“A Very Short Story” is typical of Minimalism because it is an admixture of the imagined and the autobiographical. In manuscript drafts the nurse’s name is Ag, which Hemingway revealed in a letter was “short for Agnes,” and said it had to be changed because “Ag is libelous.”⁵¹ Scott Donaldson maintained that writing “A Very Short Story” was essentially a “therapeutic” act, a tale that resulted from Hemingway’s desire to punish Agnes von Kurowsky for her infidelity.⁵² While it is impossible to know Hemingway’s exact emotional response to the end of the relationship, it is telling that he used some of the circumstances and language from Agnes’s “break-up” letter in his fictional account. The narrator says that “on the train from Padua to Milan they quarrelled [sic] about her not being willing to come home at once” (66). The narrative provides a detail omitted from the letter, as Agnes says only that “I tried hard to make you understand a bit of what I was thinking on that trip from Padua to Milan, but, you acted like a spoiled child, & I couldn’t keep on hurting you.”⁵³ Hemingway’s narrator says that the letter Luz sends to the protagonist declares that “she loved him as always, but she realized now it was only a boy and girl love” (66). Agnes was seven years older than Hemingway, a fact that formed part of her rationalization for her actions: “But, I am now & always will be too old, & that’s the truth, & I can’t get away from the fact that you’re just a boy—a kid.”⁵⁴ Hemingway does not reveal that his protagonist was acting like a “spoiled child” or that there was a significant age difference between the lovers, instead changing the terms to “boy and girl love.” The main character in “A Very Short Story” is repeatedly victimized by women, never the transgressor.

In his tales dealing with marriage, Hemingway presents equally bitter situations but tends to be more subtle in his method. Biographical information is less important, but much meaning can be derived from a single word or action. “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot” is somewhat unusual, a cruel polemic about a sexually incompatible couple that ends with the wife contentedly embracing

lesbianism. Originally titled “Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” the story was an attack on the poets Chard Powers Smith and T. S. Eliot; the former wrote an angry letter in response and was in turn threatened by Hemingway.⁵⁵ Less salacious and more successful works of fiction than “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot,” “Out of Season” and “Cat in the Rain” are closely related as both explore the destructive nature of capriciousness. In “Out of Season,” a husband insists that his wife accompany him on an illegal fishing trip. Hemingway does not indicate the motivation for the expedition, and it is a venture that in many ways defies logic. The couple is unaware of what the penalty might be if they are caught. While the narrator says that it is a “wonderful day for trout fishing” (97), it is so cold that Tiny, the wife, feels chilled despite the fact that she is wearing three sweaters. They are in Italy, and their guide, Peduzzi, speaks poor English, in part because he is drunk. The journey to the fishing spot is, unsurprisingly, fraught with tension. Peduzzi insists they stop for Marsala, and he finds that the Specialty of Domestic and Foreign Wines shop is closed, information that “someone passing by” passes on to Peduzzi “scornfully” (98). The expedition seems cursed from its inception, a darkly humorous account of failure.

Peduzzi’s incompetence exacerbates the friction between the young man and his wife. The protagonist asks the elder man about fishing before lunch, but during the meal the couple quarrels. The subject of their disagreement is ambiguous, although Kenneth G. Johnston argued that they are having a dispute over whether Tiny should have an abortion. Shortly after the couple arrives at the Concordia for Marsala, the husband apologizes, telling his wife,

“I’m sorry you feel so rotten, Tiny,” he said. “I’m sorry I talked the way I did at lunch. We were both getting at the same thing from different angles.”

“It doesn’t make any difference,” she said. “None of it makes any difference” (99).

Johnston interprets “her lagging behind, her sullenness, her leaving her drink untouched” as signs that she is in opposition to her husband’s desire that she terminate the pregnancy. The key to Johnston’s position, however, is Tiny’s misunderstanding of the drunken Peduzzi’s English. Johnston argued that when the guide says “daughter” and Tiny hears “doctor,” it is a type of Freudian slip.⁵⁶ The more likely cause of the couple’s disagreement is that she is frustrated with her husband’s lack of empathy: she does not want to go fishing. When he introduces the idea at lunch, she says as much and he does not listen to her. She does not feel well, what they are doing is illegal, and Tiny does not like being involved in one of her husband’s caprices. The man eventually regrets his decision, admitting that

“everybody in the town saw us going through with these rods. We’re probably being followed by the game police now. I wish we weren’t in on this damn thing. This damned old fool is so drunk, too.”

“Of course you haven’t got the guts to just go back,” said the wife. “Of course you have to go on.”

“Why don’t you go back? Go on back, Tiny.”

“I’m going to stay with you. If you go to jail we might as well both go”

(100).

Before the trip becomes a resolute failure because the men have no *piombo*, or lead, for sinkers, Tiny heads back to the hotel. Not yet completely defeated, the young man gives Peduzzi four lire and half-heartedly commits to another attempt at fishing the next day.

Well after he had written “Out of Season,” Hemingway made a series of provocative comments about it in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald. He admitted that the piece is strongly autobiographical, and that it “was an almost literal transcription of what happened. Your ear is

always more acute when you have been upset by a row of any sort, mine I mean, and when I came in from the unproductive fishing trip I wrote that story right off on the typewriter without punctuation.”⁵⁷ Hadley served as the model for Tiny. Hemingway also revealed that the plot was to focus on Peduzzi, that “Out of Season” was intended

to be a tragic [sic] about the drunk of a guide because I reported him to the hotel owner—the one who appears in *Cat in the Rain*—and he fired him and as that was the last job he had in town and he was quite drunk and very desperate, hanged himself in the stable. At that time I was writing the *In Our Time* chapters and I wanted to write a tragic story *without* violence. So I didn’t put in the hanging. Maybe that sounds silly. I didn’t think the story needed it.⁵⁸

Peduzzi seems an ancillary figure in the narrative, so it is somewhat surprising that Hemingway meant to cast him in the central role of a tragedy.

Peduzzi’s supposed suicide has been dismissed by scholars in the years since Hemingway’s death, but it is an omission that deserves careful consideration. In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway attributed his decision to withhold information about the guide’s death to his desire to put the Iceberg Principle into practice, arguing that “I had omitted the real end of it which was that the old man hanged himself. This was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood.”⁵⁹ Carlos Baker, Joseph Flora, and James Steinke roundly dismissed Hemingway’s purported experiment.⁶⁰ While there is little textual evidence to support Hemingway’s assertion, it is a feasible argument if “Out of Season” is read in the context of “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” Peduzzi has been rejected by his town and stripped of much of his personal dignity. When he points out his daughter to the young

couple, she turns away from him and disappears inside her home (100). He is, Hemingway implies, a lonely outcast. Given his age, his penchant for alcohol, and unwanted social isolation, he is in many ways comparable to the old man in “Well-Lighted Place.” The latter has lost his wife and is estranged from his family, perhaps because he too has lost his sense of purpose. Both Peduzzi and the old man have been disconnected from their respective communities, and within the economy of Hemingway’s fiction, extreme isolation is a state that leads to depression and death. After spending time with Tiny and her husband, perhaps Peduzzi has been reminded of his own failed relationships and concludes that there is little hope for reconciliation.

The material Hemingway omitted from “Cat in the Rain” is also important, although less dramatic than a suicide. Composed in the early spring months of 1923, “Cat in the Rain” is a remarkable narrative in that on its surface it is rather mundane.⁶¹ The plot follows an American couple staying at a hotel in Italy. While peering out her window on a rainy afternoon, the wife sees a cat attempting to keep itself dry. Husband and wife seem to have had a dispute, but they have few options for distancing themselves from one another; Hemingway offers few details about the argument, and it is the key event that has been omitted by virtue of the fact that it has happened “off stage.” The husband is laying in bed reading, unresponsive. The “American girl” ventures out to find the kitty and feels dejected when she learns it has left its place. Returning to her room, she recites to her uncaring partner a litany of things she wants, ostensibly to mitigate her immediate feelings of disappointment. In a minor twist at the conclusion, the *padrone* of the hotel sends a cat up to the couple’s room.

Like “Out of Season,” “Cat in the Rain” is essentially about the destructiveness of capriciousness. The young woman is impulsive, craving attention regardless of whether it is positive or negative. When she decides she wants a pet, she does not think about her immediate

circumstances. A hotel room is not a suitable place to care for an animal, especially if it is feral. The wife's unspoken desire that her husband capture, or perhaps steal, something that belongs to someone else is an absurd errand. The composition of the room, the man in repose on the bed reading a book, and the woman plotting for a means to procure a feline companion suggest that "Cat in the Rain" is an elaborate allusion to Francisco Goya's "El Sueño de La Razon Produce Monstruos."⁶² Hemingway counted Goya among his influences, and the Spanish painter's work figures heavily into several of the works in *In Our Time*.⁶³ "El Sueño de La Razon" is perhaps the most well-known piece in a series of aquatint engravings entitled "Los Caprichos."⁶⁴ Created in 1799, Goya's prints were an attack on various types of degradation, including "the vanity of men" and "the coquetry of women."⁶⁵ "El Sueño de La Razon" pictures a man, presumably a scholar, sleeping at his desk, his elbow covering his paper and fountain pen. In the darkness behind him, a brood of animals, mostly owls and bats, menacingly move about. Goya includes two flightless exceptions, however: a pair of dubious-looking cats, one behind the man's midsection and other at the lower right of the frame.

Within the context of Goya's print, the two felines that appear in "Cat in the Rain" represent the woman's capriciousness. Her husband is effectively asleep to her desires, distracted by his own "intellectual" pursuits. As his wife leaves the room, he "went on reading, lying propped up with the two pillows at the foot of the bed" (91). When she sees the innkeeper, the narrator reveals that she is deluded by his charms and that she "liked him. She liked the deadly serious way he received any complaints. She liked his dignity. She liked the way he wanted to serve her. She liked the way he felt about being a hotel-keeper. She liked his old, heavy face and big hands" (92). As Warren Bennett indicated, the coquettish "like" she feels for the *padrone* is contrasted with George's "disdain" for her.⁶⁶ Hemingway's clipped, poetic repetitions suggest a

simpler message, however. The “American girl” does not consider that the *padrone* is paid to treat his guests in the way she likes to be treated, to behave according to a code of conduct that will ensure satisfaction and repeat business. His conduct towards her is predicated on his desire for financial gain. The implication is that the wife is paying the bill for the hotel, so she expects a similar type of “professional dedication” from her husband.

Continuing his figurative slumber, George is indifferent when his wife returns to the room empty-handed. In response, the woman offers a litany of new desires, all of which demonstrate the depth of her capriciousness. After vainly staring at herself in the mirror and complaining about her short hair, she falls into a rhythm: “I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I can feel. . . . I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her” (93). Her husband weakly replies “yeah?” so she continues: “And I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles. And I want it to be spring and I want to brush my hair about in front of a mirror and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes.” George finally begins to awaken and exercise his “voice of reason,” telling his wife to “shut up and get something to read.” He is defeated, however, when the maid arrives at the door awkwardly holding a tortoise-shell cat (94). The image of the animal “pressed tight against her,” swinging “down against her body” suggests that she is uncomfortable and that it has almost succeeded in getting away from her. The awkwardness of the image implies that the feline is a fitting reward for an ill-conceived, unreasonable plan.

As the allusion to Goya’s “El Sueño de La Razon” suggests, “Cat in the Rain” is comprised of implicative imagery. Constructed of a series of independent scenes, it is appropriate that Hemingway begins the piece with a painterly description of the scene outside of the hotel. Rendering the war monument in the square, the narrator says that “it was made of

bronze and glistened in the rain. It was raining. The rain dripped from the palm trees. Water stood in pools in the gravel paths. The sea broke in a long line in the rain and slipped back down the beach to come up and break again in a long line in the rain” (91). The repetition of “rain” and “long line” represents a melding of poetic language with synesthetic detail, the sound of the rain falling in puddles and the breaking of the waves implying a soft sonic consistency. Hemingway frequently commented on his indebtedness to the French artist Paul Cézanne, first in the excised section of “Big Two-Hearted River” and again in *A Moveable Feast*. Hemingway’s precise, direct sentences are metaphorically reminiscent of the painter’s brushstrokes, which were described by art historian John Walford as a “repeated series of short gestures” laid “on the surface of the canvas so as to register individually on the eye.” In *Hemingway and the Arts*, Emily Stipe Watts compared the suggestive nature of Hemingway’s sentences with the technique of both Goya and Cézanne, positing that “artists like Goya or Cézanne emphasized economy and demanded that each brush stroke function as completely as possible. For them a brush stroke was intensive and essential. . . .”⁶⁷ While the content of “Cat in the Rain” is allusive to Goya, Hemingway’s stylistic choices are in part attributable to Cézanne.

Goya’s influence on Hemingway is most acutely demonstrated, however, in inter-chapters IX through XIV, all of which deal with the Spanish bullfight. The tragedy of the ritual is depicted as a confluence of sensorial stimulation in fragmentary images. In his review of *in our time*, Edmund Wilson maintained that Hemingway’s “bullfight sketches have the dry sharpness and elegance of the bull-fight lithographs of Goya. And, like Goya, he is concerned first of all with making a fine picture. Too proud an artist to simplify in the interests of conventional pretenses, he is showing you what life is like.”⁶⁸ E. R. Hagemann observed that “grouped together as they are, these six Chapters comprise a miniature tauromaquia derived ultimately

from Francisco Goya's thirty-three etchings of 1816."⁶⁹ While the poignancy of the prose-poems is generally derived from narrative style and austere physical motion, a single image tends to stand out in each. In IX, for example, the exhausted *torero*, who has had to kill five bulls, "sat down in the sand and puked and they held a cape over him while the crowd hollered and threw things down into the bullring" (83). The décor and pageantry of the cape is oddly juxtaposed with the implied tastes and smells associated with the matador's action. Hemingway occasionally incorporates scatological references into the interchapters as a means of adding sensorial power. In Chapter XV, the soon-to-be-executed Sam Cardinella "lost control of his sphincter muscle" and the guards who had been carrying him "were both disgusted" (143). The images in the other chapters on *toreo* are a similar mixture of the beautiful and the grotesque: the graceful movements of a picador alongside the hanging entrails of his horse (89); the synesthetic vigor of Villalta and his bull charging at one another, man and beast becoming "one," and "the red hilt of the sword sticking out dully between the bull's shoulders" (105). Goya and Hemingway continually tested the boundary between allure and repugnance, and this is perhaps what led Wilson to draw a comparison between painter and writer.

Hemingway repeatedly suggests that life is replete with moments of beauty and brutality. His varied narrative voices offer no mitigating reassurances or reasons for optimism, but they communicate wonder alongside ugliness. Sheldon Norman Grebstein maintained that Hemingway differentiated himself from his peers because he "almost always avoids direct exposition of theme, didactic description or discussion of character, and authorial commentary upon action and motive."⁷⁰ The closest he comes to offering a type of guidance is the occasional mention of a rule or law. In Chapter VIII, another scene derived from a newspaper article that involves a pointless act of violence, a policeman named Drevitts asks his partner, Jimmy Boyle,

if they are going to get in trouble for shooting a pair of Hungarian cigar-store robbers without first attempting to apprehend them.⁷¹ With disturbing simplicity, Boyle points out that the perpetrators were “crooks” and “Wops,” and therefore expendable. The implication is that there is no way to rationalize an irrational act, so by default there is nothing for the speaker to ponder. Joe Butler, the boy in “My Old Man,” attempts to maintain the dignity of his father’s legacy but overhears two men refer to his dad as a “crook.” Their irreverence leads him to nihilistically conclude that “when they get started they don’t leave a guy nothing” (129). Perhaps influenced by the work written in the American Literary Naturalist tradition, Hemingway often depicts negative forces as unrelenting and indifferent. Even though the protagonist in “The Revolutionist” is described as a resolute idealist, in the end he must accept the cruel irony of a Sion jail cell.⁷² Hemingway’s narrators, however, do not always seem completely unsympathetic. In the Nick Adams stories, the speaker seems most closely attuned to the protagonist, implying an uncommon sense of empathy and understanding.

“Indian Camp” is told by a third-person narrator who seems to have a special affinity or sensitivity towards the experience of the young protagonist, Nick Adams. In the beginning of the piece, Nick, his father, and Uncle George are called to a nearby Indian camp to help a woman attempting to give birth to a baby in breech position. Although he is probably between eight and twelve years old, Nick is allowed to help Dr. Adams perform an irregular Caesarean-section that includes the use of a jack-knife and fishing line. The woman’s husband lies in a bunk nearby with an injured foot, but it is discovered after the delivery that he has cut his own throat. Nick sees what has happened before he can be escorted out of the shanty. During the boat-ride back to camp, Nick asks his father questions about birth and death. The speaker enters the boy’s thoughts in the final line, revealing that Nick “felt quite sure that he would never die” (19). Nick’s

delusions of immortality suggest that he has not yet understood the full weight of the bloody scenes from which he is departing.

The subtlety of the narration, the absence of important details, and the numerous implications that can be drawn from “Indian Camp” are in part what make it one of the finest tales in the American Minimalist tradition. Scholars such as Philip Young, Robert M. Slabey, Joseph Flora, and Clinton S. Burhans have focused their criticism on Nick as an innocent figure who has been initiated into, or victimized by, a vicious world. Nick Adams’s life is marked by a series of events that have the potential to cause long-lasting and substantial psychological changes, so part of what motivates the ongoing conversation about “Indian Camp” is the degree to which this experience has been damaging.⁷³ The Nick Adams stories are often interpreted in the context of one another despite the fact that they were not written according to a linear chronology; Nick’s presence at the camp has deep implications for all of the narratives in which he is involved.

One of the more obscure arguments to arise about “Indian Camp” is over whether Uncle George is in fact the father of the child.⁷⁴ The case for Uncle George’s paternity is predicated on seemingly minor plot details. He arrives at the camp before Nick and Dr. Adams, and the narrator says that Uncle George is smoking and “gave both the Indians cigars” (15). His vulgar attitude towards the mother, whom he calls a “squaw bitch” for biting him, may suggest his irritation is due to nerves. When the unusually excited Dr. Adams tells his younger brother that the impromptu surgery is “one for the medical journal,” George acidly replies, “Oh, you’re a great man, all right” (18). At the end of the narrative, George stays behind, and the reason for his remaining in the camp is not given.

In the original manuscript of “Indian Camp,” dated November 4, 1923, Hemingway presents a different set of possibilities and shows that the iceberg for this tale is rather complex. The first eight pages of “Indian Camp” were excised, an editorial decision that in retrospect was wise. Philip Young published the omitted material in *The Nick Adams Stories* in 1970, calling it “Three Shots.” Uncle George’s attitude about the journey to the camp has largely been shaped by his irritation with Nick. The manuscript reveals that during a bout of cowardice inspired by Fanny J. Crosby’s hymn “Some Day the Silver Cord Will Break,” a song centered on a consideration of the inevitability of death, Nick disrupted Uncle George during a fishing expedition.⁷⁵ Nick was instructed to fire his rifle three times if there was trouble at the camp, and when his uncle hears the shots he complains,

“Damn that kid,” Uncle George said as they rowed back. “What did you tell him to call us in for? He’s probably got the Heeby Jeebies about something.”

Uncle George was an enthusiastic fisherman and his father’s younger brother.

“Oh well. He’s pretty small.” His father said.

“That’s no reason to bring him into the woods with us.”

“I know he’s an awful coward,” his father said. “but ~~this is the~~ we’re all yellow at that age.”

“I can’t stand him,” George said, “He’s such an awful liar.”

Hemingway deleted several telling lines from the exchange, cuts that Young honored when he published “Three Shots.” Trying to assuage his angered brother, Dr. Adams continues by saying,

“Oh well forget it. You’ll get plenty of fishing ((anyway)). ~~Besides jacklighting isn’t much of a sport.~~”

~~“Anything that’s worth doing is worth not being interrupted in.”~~

~~“Forget it.”~~⁷⁶

In the deleted dialogue, Dr. Adams has subtly insulted his brother by insinuating that George’s irritation is unwarranted because he himself is engaged in something that is improper. George is not fishing the “right way” just as Nick is not exercising an expected degree of courage and self-sufficiency. When George later tells his brother that he is a “great man,” the implication is that the younger Adams has not forgotten the original slight. By gloating in the aftermath of what seems to have been a general success, Dr. Adams has also committed a violation of decorum. In the context of the material Hemingway withheld, George is not a new father but rather an angered sportsman who is finally given the opportunity to retaliate by pointing out his brother’s imperfections.

Subtle questions of propriety often cause friction in the Nick Adams stories. True to the Imagist axiom that no word be wasted, the language in Hemingway’s narrations often seems extraordinarily momentous. In tales such as “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” or “The End of Something,” actions cannot be disregarded as unreasonable or capricious. Perceived slights are at times indicative of self-righteousness. In “The Doctor,” Henry Adams is insulted by Dick Boulton, a man he has hired to help saw logs. The wood has washed up on the beach in front of the Adams’s cabin, lost by a boat from the logging company. Dr. Adams considers it “driftwood,” Dick feels it is stolen property. Henry threatens Boulton but is backed down by the bigger man, forced to accept his own cowardice.⁷⁷ Dr. Adams tells his wife that his adversary “wanted a row” so he would not have to repay a debt. When Mrs. Adams, a Christian Scientist and in Sheridan Baker’s terms an “exacting hypochondriac,” condescendingly tells her husband that she hopes he did not lose his temper and that “he who ruleth his spirit is greater than he that

taketh a city” (25).⁷⁸ The only relief the doctor receives comes when he finds Nick, who may or may not have witnessed the scene on the beach, and they disappear into the woods in search of black squirrels.

Nick rarely seems to have a curative effect on others; he spends much of his time coming to terms emotionally with his own difficult experiences. Even with his father, his presence is positive but he does not say anything particularly profound or helpful. On the other hand, a young boy is not necessarily expected to perform such a role in his father’s life. As Nick’s story progresses, he begins to face more mature matters. “The End of Something” and “The Three-Day Blow,” both of which were inspired by Hemingway’s “brief romance” with Marjorie Bump, are about his painful break-up with a young woman.⁷⁹ The narratives are Minimalistic: actions are more meaningful than dialogue or exposition. Adams is in his early to mid-teens in these stories, no longer the young innocent who appears in “Indian Camp” and “The Doctor.” In “The End,” he employs tactics similar to those of Dick Boulton by engineering an argument with Marjorie so it will be easier to part with her. The couple goes out fishing together, and Nick grows irritated with Marjorie because she repeatedly shows that she is in many ways the young man’s intellectual equal. She sees through his ruse and asks him to explain the true problem; all he can articulate is that “it isn’t fun anymore. Not any of it” (34). The one indication that the break-up was planned is that Nick’s friend Bill arrives in the end and asks if there was a “scene” (35). Bill offers little consolation, unable to interpret his comrade’s body language.

In “The End of Something,” Nick Adams is not a particularly sympathetic figure, and “The Three Day Blow” accomplishes little in re-casting him as such. “The End” opens with exposition about the final days of Hortons Bay as “a lumbering town,” now ruined and vacated. While there are obvious imagistic parallels between the collapse of the town and the dissolution

of the young couple's relationship, the opening paragraphs speak directly to Nick's own emotional arc. The implication is that he and Marjorie did have "fun" at some point, that she aroused his senses, and that the problem is that her presence no longer elicits an emotional reaction. Nick is not yet old enough to break-up with Marjorie in a manner that shows he is empathetic; everything about his methods reflects profound self-absorption. Nick shows even less tact in the first draft of the story, which Hemingway wrote in March of 1924. In the published version, Marjorie sees the ruins of a mill and romantically opines that it "seems more like a castle." In the manuscript, Nick's girlfriend is less confident and he more negative:

"What's that ruin Nick?" Marjorie asked.

"It's Stroud's old mill."

"It looks like a castle."

"Not much."⁸⁰

The terseness of the dialogue reflects a mutual aggression. Hemingway achieves a stronger balance in the final draft in terms of characterization. Given the circumstances, Marjorie acquits herself rather well. The equanimity she shows as she rows away from the picnic site contrasts with the carousing that takes place in the narrative that follows "The End." Seeking a means to quell his own feelings of loss, Nick drinks with Bill in "The Three-Day Blow," numbing himself with talk of books and baseball.

Similar to Harold Krebs, Nick Adams does not achieve a sense of peace in matters of love, at least not within *In Our Time*. In "Cross Country Snow," he shows ambivalence about the prospect of returning home to his wife and becoming a father. The implication is that the emotional high Nick feels from skiing cannot be matched by the faded joys, and responsibilities, of domestic life.⁸¹ As he settles into a warm inn after taking a run, Nick proclaims that "there's

nothing really can touch skiing, is there? . . . The way it feels when you first drop off on a long run” (109). His sentiments are reminiscent of those he expresses to Marjorie, implying that his home-life “isn’t fun anymore.” With his anti-climactic wedding out of the way, he knows that “there isn’t any good in promising” because of the vicissitudes of life. Circumstances can change quickly, and he knows this because he has been to war.

While much of the fiction in *In Our Time* involves physical conflict, only one interchapter, Chapter VI, and two short stories, “The Battler” and “Big Two-Hearted River,” are specifically about Nick’s fighting experiences. In “The Battler,” Nick is knocked from a moving railcar in northern Michigan and meets a former boxer named Ad Francis. A third man, Bugs, a figure who is almost certainly modeled on Bildad from Sherwood Anderson’s “I Want to Know Why,” is Ad’s caretaker.⁸² The focus of “The Battler” is on the fragility of the human psyche, and it becomes clear early on that Ad and Bugs are mentally frail. Early in their conversation, Ad says,

“I’m crazy. Listen, you ever been crazy?”

“No,” Nick said. “How does it get to you?”

“I don’t know,” Ad said. “When you got it you don’t know about it. You know me, don’t you?” (56).

Ad’s paradoxical self-awareness seems strange until Bugs is required to knock him out with a blackjack. In his deft control over the broken-down fighter, the caretaker’s complexity is demonstrated through his actions more than his words. Bugs’s deliberate, ritualistic treatment of the food he cooks adumbrates Nick’s careful preparation in “Big Two-Hearted River.”⁸³ Francis’s instability implies that unlike his companion, he has not found routines that grant him the ability to function in a somewhat sound manner.

Ad Francis has been wounded mentally and physically during his career as a fighter. Bugs tells Nick that Ad was accused of marrying his own sister and that the publicity caused her to leave him. His ear is missing, suggesting that he has taken many beatings inside and outside of the ring. By comparison, however, Nick's medical history is more complicated. In Chapter VI, which follows directly after "The Battler," he is shown sitting with his back to a church. His "legs stuck out awkwardly," and the narrator reveals that this is because he has "been hit in the spine" (63). Nick tells his wounded friend Rinaldi that they have "made a separate peace," having essentially paid whatever debt they may have owed to their country. Philip Young argued that Chapter VI is central not only to *In Our Time* but to much of Hemingway's oeuvre, maintaining that "it would be quite impossible to exaggerate the importance of this short scene" and that Nick's injury "culminates, climaxes, and epitomizes the wounds he has been getting as a growing boy."⁸⁴ The extent of Nick's spinal wound is difficult to gauge, however, because he is able to hike, ski, and fish after he is demobilized. In a later work, "A Way You'll Never Be," he admits that he has suffered from a serious head injury for which he should have been trepanned.⁸⁵ In "Cross Country Snow," he tells George that he cannot telemark because of his leg, a wound that indicates Nick may have been hurt in the same way Hemingway was during his service with the Red Cross.

The emotional and physical toll of Nick's experiences to some extent motivate his actions in "Big Two-Hearted River," so the tale is in some ways a "culmination." However, the narrative is about a young man going through the process of healing, not an "end" to anything but rather an illustration of a single step in a long phase of recovery. In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway recounts a day he spent working on the story, probably in August of 1924, and how it "was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it."⁸⁶ Read in the context of the

vignette about Nick, as well as all of the other accounts of his time in World War I, the centrality of the omitted war becomes apparent. Nick's every word and movement suggest that he is on the verge of something and that his mental stability is at stake.

Similar to the opening passages of "Cat in the Rain" and "The End of Something," the first paragraph of "Big Two-Hearted" contains meaningful images that establish the plot in a concrete time and place. Nick arrives in Seney, Michigan by train and finds a charred landscape, a scene that Kenneth G. Johnston described as a "Cézanne watercolor created from touches of blacks and grays and patches of white."⁸⁷ The narrator explains that

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 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 (133).

The logging town had been destroyed by a forest-fire in 1891.⁸⁸ The implication is that what Nick sees reminds him of the war, and that his movement towards river country that is fertile represents regeneration. The scene may be allusive to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and many scholars have posited that the poem plays a role in several of the stories in *In Our Time*.

Wendolyn E. Tetlow and Linda Welshimer Wagner, for example, maintained that Hemingway mimicked some of the techniques found in Eliot's verse.⁸⁹ William Adair detected a reference to the "Game of Chess" section of *The Waste Land* in "Cat in the Rain."⁹⁰ Carlos Baker wrote that Hemingway "was unable to take it [*The Waste Land*] seriously," however, at least when beginning to write "Cat in the Rain."⁹¹ Given his war experiences, Hemingway had other

material to draw from. In his journalistic pieces on the Greco-Turkish conflict, he described Constantinople as a city in which

the dust is so thick that a dog trotting along the road that parallels the Pera hillside kicks up a puff like a bullet striking every time his paws hit the ground. It is almost ankle deep on a man and the wind swirls it in clouds. If it rains this is all mud. The sidewalks are so narrow that everyone has to walk in the street and the streets are like rivers.⁹²

When he arrived in Adrianople, the scene was equally dire and he reported that he “found the station a mud-hole crowded with soldiers, bundles, bed-springs, bedding, sewing machines, babies, broken carts, all in the mud and the drizzling rain. Kerosene flares lit up the scene.”⁹³ In light of his own knowledge and memories, it seems absurd to assert that Hemingway drew imagistic inspiration from a cryptic poem written by a poet he did not seem to admire.⁹⁴

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot makes frequent reference to the past, to literary and historical traditions belonging to defunct civilizations. Conversely, Nick Adams spends most of his time focusing on the present in “Big Two-Hearted.” The narrator is methodical in his descriptions, concentrating on sensorial details rather than Nick’s contemplative moments. Early in Part I, the speaker says that Nick’s “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” (134). Hemingway engages the senses throughout the story, particularly with his use of light and color. In a letter to Gertrude Stein, he said that in “Big Two-Hearted” he was attempting “to do the country like Cézanne,”⁹⁵ a goal he at times accomplishes through sharp, clear images of the landscape:

Nick kept his direction by the sun. He knew where he wanted to strike the river and he kept on through the pine plain, mounting small rises to see other rises ahead of him and sometimes from the top of a rise a great solid island of pines off to his right or his left. He broke off some sprigs of the heathery sweet fern, and put them under his pack straps. The chafing crushed it and he smelled it as he walked (136).

Hemingway creates a layered effect by subtly shifting visual perspective. Like the Impressionists, he begins by communicating the position of the light. As Nick progressively ascends and descends, his view of the landscape is gradually elongated and he is able to progressively see farther into the distance until he views “a great solid islands of pines” rather than more rises. In the last two sentences, Hemingway brings the focus back in close to Nick, describing what he smells as the “heathery sweet fern” is crushed against his shoulder. Working his way towards the area he will fish, Nick favors experience over synthesis.

When Nick is inactive, the narrator’s sentences reflect the protagonist’s agitation by becoming clipped, or more *staccato*. At the end of the first day, Nick climbs into his tent and grows uneasy:

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 (139).

His thoughts unwinding in an odd series of brief rationalizations, Nick finally relaxes when he realizes that there is more work to do, more for him to accomplish. Passages such as these

demonstrate a musicality reminiscent of Amy Lowell's Polyphonic Prose in that the length of the "phrases" matches the emotional tenor of the content. The pace of Nick's thoughts implies a sense of paranoia, an increase in his heart rate that finally leads to a *decrecendo* of more elongated sentences.

The methodical fishing sequence in Part II implies that Nick is safe when he focuses on the present but feels threatened when recalling the past. The rigorous hike into the forest from Seney, along with the current of the river, likely causes pain in his back and knee. His moments of agitation are probably related to his head wound as well as all of the brutality he has witnessed during his life. The war is nowhere more present than when Nick contemplates fishing in "the swamp," a place that in the context of "Big Two-Hearted" serves as an objective correlative for the murky darkness of Nick's memories. Conveying the protagonist's thoughts, the narrator says that "in the swamp the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches; in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure" (155). Without the distraction of the river's movement and the comfort of daylight, Nick would have no option but to confront his memories. As Nick heads back to camp after catching two sizeable trout, the narrator, again conveying Nick's thoughts, says that "there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp" (156). In that moment, however, Nick is not ready.

The story did not originally end with the narrator admitting that Nick is still psychologically fragile but with a lengthy contemplation of fishing and writing that Pound would likely have dismissed as "licherary." The omitted passages are useful because they speak to Hemingway's aesthetic but would have weakened the tone and unity of "Big Two-Hearted." For example, Nick opines that "talking about anything was bad. Writing about anything actual was

bad. It always killed it. The only writing that was any good was what you made up, what you imagined, what made everything come true.”⁹⁶ In his own writing, Hemingway often begins with autobiography and imaginatively transform it into fiction, so this statement seems hypocritical. “Big Two-Hearted” is loosely based on a fishing trip Hemingway took along with friends in 1919.⁹⁷ He seems to be attempting to fashion Nick into a separate writer with his own credo, but it does not work. In fact, Nick thinks of his spouse at one point and she happens to have the same name as Hemingway’s first wife: “They were all married to fishing. Ezra thought fishing was a joke. So did most every body. He’d been married to it before he married Hadley. Really married to it. It wasn’t any joke. So he lost them all. Hadley thought it was because they didn’t like her.”⁹⁸ The mood and method of this portion of the tale is inconsistent with the parts that precede it. The excised section of “Big Two-Hearted” was later published in Philip Young’s *The Nick Adams Stories* as “On Writing,” an appropriate title because it is more of an essay than a narrative.⁹⁹ It is a series of what Gertrude Stein would have termed “meditations,” and she famously told Hemingway that such “remarks are not literature.”¹⁰⁰ Stein’s advice is an important axiom for all writers, but it is crucial to Minimalists.

Hemingway’s role in the development of American Literary Minimalism cannot be overstated. Perhaps more than any other book, *In Our Time* models the aesthetic tenets of the mode. By alluding to historical events and creating precisely wrought objective correlatives, Hemingway wrote compressed tales that achieve the interpretive depth of poetry. While not all of his attempts at generating implication through omission are unqualified successes, narratives such as “Indian Camp” and “Big Two-Hearted River” stand among the finest stories in the tradition. Hemingway did not singlehandedly invent the central techniques found in austere fiction, but he showed what was possible: sparsely written fiction, spoken by a self-effacing, non-

intrusive narrator, can achieve emotional and intellectual depth. Perhaps the greatest testament to the magnitude of his achievement, however, is his enduring legacy. Although Hemingway's work has fallen in and out of favor since his death, it has influenced a number of important authors. In 1963, a young, ambitious writer named Raymond Carver admitted to a friend that after the deaths of Hemingway and William Carlos Williams, he felt a burgeoning pressure to act as their successor.¹⁰¹

Notes

¹ Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 27.

² Quoted in Charles A. Fenton, *The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway: The Early Years* (New York: Viking, 1960), p. 31.

³ See Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1932), p. 192.

⁴ Ernest Hemingway and George Plimpton, "The Art of Fiction XXI: Ernest Hemingway," *The Paris Review*, no. 18 (Spring, 1958): 75.

⁵ James Nagel, "Literary Impressionism and *In Our Time*," *The Hemingway Review* 6, no. 2 (1987), p. 19.

⁶ Linda Welshimer Wagner, *Hemingway and Faulkner: inventors/masters* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1975), pp. 41, 55-65.

⁷ Quoted in Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Ernest Hemingway's Apprenticeship: Oak Park, 1916-1917* (Washington, D. C.: Microcard Editions, 1971), p. xvii.

⁸ Constance Cappel Montgomery, *Hemingway in Michigan* (New York: Fleet, 1966), p. 43.

⁹ David Marut, "Out of the Wastebasket: Hemingway's High School Stories," *Ernest Hemingway: The Oak Park Legacy*, ed. James Nagel (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996), p. 82.

¹⁰ Marut, "Out of the Wastebasket," pp. 89-90.

¹¹ George Francis, *Legends of the Lakes or History, Traditions and Mysteries, Gleaned from Years of Experience Among the Pioneers, Voyageurs and Indians* (Chicago: G. F. Thomas, 1884), pp. 56-57.

¹² Ernest Hemingway, "Judgment of Manitou," *Tabula* 22 (February, 1916), pp. 9-10. Reprinted in facsimile in Brucoli, *Ernest Hemingway's Apprenticeship*, pp. 96-97. David G. Mandelbaum described the role of "Manito" in the Cree culture, explaining that

the concept of a single all powerful creator was dominant in Plains Cree religious ideology and ceremonialism. Every prayer for supernatural aid, every ritual addressed to divine powers, had to begin with an invocation to *kice•manito•*, Great *Manito*. All the phenomena of the universe are considered to be under His control and everything was created by His will. He was not personalized, nor given any definite abode other than a general empyrean locale; He did not appear to men in visions. Moreover, He was conceived as being too great, too awesome, to be asked directly for His blessing.

It is interesting, and consistent with his Cree heritage, that Pierre does not address Manitou or ask him for mercy once he realizes his fate. His decisiveness in part extends from the fact that he knows that there is no possibility of divine intervention or chance for mercy. Mandelbaum, *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1979), p. 157.

¹³ Ernest Hemingway and Fred Wilcoxen, "Athletic Verse: The Tackle," *Tabula* 23 (March, 1917): 39. Reprinted in facsimile in Brucoli, *Ernest Hemingway's Apprenticeship*, p. 107. Also printed in Ernest Hemingway, *Ernest Hemingway: 88 Poems*, ed. Nicholas Gerogiannis (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979), p. 11.

¹⁴ Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*, pp. 31-34.

¹⁵ James Nagel, "Hemingway and the Italian Legacy," *Hemingway in Love and War: The Lost Diary of Agnes Von Kurowsky* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), pp. 201-02.

¹⁶ Nagel, “Hemingway and the Italian Legacy,” pp. 216-26, 239. Many accounts of Hemingway’s service in the American Red Cross and subsequent wounding have been written, and a number of them include inaccuracies and misinformation. Nagel’s is the most carefully written and researched.

¹⁷ Michael Reynolds, *The Young Hemingway* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), pp. 93-94.

¹⁸ Reynolds, *The Young Hemingway*, p. 95.

¹⁹ Ernest Hemingway, “Crossroads—An Anthology: Pauline Snow,” reprinted in Peter Griffin, *Along With Youth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 124, and Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, *The Portable Stephen Crane*, ed. Joseph Katz (New York: Viking, 1977), p. 20.

²⁰ Reynolds claimed that Hemingway had not yet read *Winesburg, Ohio* in the fall of 1919, but did not cite a source for his information. Reynolds, *The Young Hemingway*, p. 96.

²¹ Hemingway, “Crossroads—An Anthology: Pauline Snow,” p. 124.

²² Ernest Hemingway, “A Free Shave,” *By-Line: Ernest Hemingway*, ed. William White (New York: Scribner, 1967), pp. 5-8. The piece is dated March 6, 1920.

²³ Quoted in Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes, *Hemingway’s Genders: Rereading the Hemingway Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 24-25.

²⁴ Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story*, pp. 84-85.

²⁵ Richard Hasbany, “The Shock of Vision: An Imagist Reading of *In Our Time*,” *Ernest Hemingway: Five Decades of Criticism*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974), p. 224.

²⁶ In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway discussed his exposure to Cézanne and other Impressionists, recalling that

if I walked down by different streets to the Jardin du Luxembourg in the afternoon I could walk through the gardens and then go to the Musee du Luxembourg where the great paintings were that have now mostly been transferred to the Louvre and the Jeu de Paume. I went there nearly every day for the Cezannes and to see the Manets and the Monets and the other Impressionists that I had first come to know about in the Art Institute at Chicago. I was learning something from the painting of Cezanne that made writing simple true sentences far from enough to make the stories have the dimensions that I was trying to put in them. I was learning very much from him but I was not articulate enough to explain it to anyone. Besides it was a secret.

Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Scribner, 2009), p. 23. Also see Nagel, “Literary Impressionism and *In Our Time*,” pp. 18-19.

²⁷ Hemingway opened “Ezra Pound and His Bel Esprit” by saying that “Ezra Pound was the most generous writer I have ever known and the most disinterested. He was always doing something practical for poets, painters, sculptors and prose writers that he believed in and he would help anyone, whether he believed in them or not, if they were in trouble.” Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, p. 177.

²⁸ Scott Donaldson, *By Force of Will: The Life and Art of Ernest Hemingway* (Lincoln: iUniverse, 2001), p. 247.

²⁹ Harry Levin, “Observations on the Style of Ernest Hemingway,” *Hemingway and His Critics*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 115.

³⁰ Ernest Hemingway, "IN OUR TIME," *The Little Review* 9 (Spring, 1923): 3-5.

³¹ Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 411.

³² See Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story*, p. 97, and Hemingway, *By-Line: Ernest Hemingway*, pp. 49-60.

³³ Hemingway and Plimpton, "The Art of Fiction XXI: Ernest Hemingway," 74.

³⁴ Ernest Hemingway, "On the Quai at Smyrna," *In Our Time* (New York: Scribner, 1930), p. 11. All subsequent references to the stories and inter-chapters in *In Our Time* are to the same edition.

³⁵ Louis H. Leiter, "Neural Projections in Hemingway's 'On the Quai at Smyrna'," *Critical Essays on Ernest Hemingway's In Our Time*, ed. Michael S. Reynolds (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), p. 139.

³⁶ Charles A. Fenton, *The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway*, p. 238, and E. R. Hagemann, "'Only Let the Story End As Soon As Possible': Time-and-History in Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*," *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham: Duke University Press: 1990), p. 193.

³⁷ George Cheatham, "The World War I Battle of Mons and Hemingway's *In Our Time* Chapter III," *The Hemingway Review* 26, no. 2 (2007): 53.

³⁸ Fenton, *The Apprenticeship*, pp. 229-36.

³⁹ Fenton, *The Apprenticeship*, p. 233.

⁴⁰ In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway said that "from the day I had found Sylvia Beach's library I had read all of Turgenev, what had been published in English of Gogol, the Constance Garnett translations of Tolstoi and the English translations of Chekov." Michael Reynolds said

that Hemingway checked out *A Sportsman's Sketches* from Beach's shop three times.

Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, p. 101, and Reynolds, *Hemingway: The Paris Years* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), p. 106.

⁴¹ Ernest Hemingway, "Refugees from Thrace," *By-Line*, p. 60, and Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story*, p. 99.

⁴² The New York Times printed two stories about the execution, but in *Hemingway's Laboratory: The Paris in our time*, Milton A. Cohen made the convincing argument that Hemingway derived Chapter V from a story published in the *Paris Tribune*. Cohen, *Hemingway's Laboratory: The Paris in our time* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), p. 149.

⁴³ See Cohen, *Hemingway's Laboratory*, pp. 148-49, and John O. Iatrides, "The United States and Greece in the Twentieth Century," *Greece in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Theodore Couloumbis, Theodore Kariotis, and Fotini Bellou (New York: Frank Cass, 2004), pp. 70-71.

⁴⁴ Wendolyn E. Tetlow argued that this vignette is proof of Hemingway's familiarity with the Imagists. Tetlow, *Hemingway's In Our Time: Lyrical Dimensions* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992), p. 29.

⁴⁵ Ernest Hemingway to Ezra Pound, Paris, August 5, 1923, in *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Scribner, 1981), pp. 91-92.

⁴⁶ Ernest Hemingway, "A Way You'll Never Be," *Winner Take Nothing* (New York: Scribners, 1970), p. 51.

⁴⁷ This vignette employs what Gerry Brenner maintained was a technique Hemingway used frequently, calling it a "lexical riddle." These types of stories, Brenner continued, "pivot upon a lexical crux, the unarticulated or ambiguous words." When the narrator says that the men

were “drunk,” he means that they were afraid. Gerry Brenner, “From ‘Sepi Jingan’ to ‘The Mother of a Queen’: Hemingway’s Three Epistemologic Formulas for Short Fiction,” *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 161.

⁴⁸ Carlos Azevedo, “Oak Park as the Thing Left Out: Surface and Depth in ‘Soldier’s Home’,” *Ernest Hemingway: The Oak Park Legacy*, ed. James Nagel (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996): 102.

⁴⁹ Ernest Hemingway, “Soldier’s Home,” manuscript, folder 708, Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁰ Hemingway to Pound, Paris, August 5, 1923, in *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961*, p. 91.

⁵¹ Ernest Hemingway, “Love,” manuscripts, folder 633, Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, pp. 1-2 of 1-2 and 1, and Ernest Hemingway to Maxwell Perkins, Key West, July 12, 1938, in *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961*, p. 469.

⁵² Scott Donaldson, “‘A Very Short Story’ as Therapy,” *Hemingway’s Neglected Short Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. Susan F. Beegel (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989): 105

⁵³ Agnes von Kurowsky to Ernest Hemingway, March 7, 1919, in *Hemingway in Love and War: The Lost Diary of Agnes von Kurowsky*, ed. Henry S. Villard and James Nagel (New York: Hyperion, 1995), p. 163.

⁵⁴ von Kurowsky to Hemingway, *Hemingway in Love*, p. 163.

⁵⁵ See Ernest Hemingway, “Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” manuscripts, folder 585, Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, and *Hemingway: The Paris Years* (New York: W.

W. Norton, 1999), p. 192, and Ernest Hemingway to Chard Powers Smith, Gstaad, January 21, 1927, in *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961*, p. 242.

⁵⁶ Kenneth G. Johnston, "Hemingway's 'Out of Season' and the Psychology of Errors," *Critical Essays on Ernest Hemingway's In Our Time*, ed. Michael S. Reynolds (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983): 229. While Johnston's Freudian argument is interesting, a doctor would be just as necessary in the case of a general illness as he would be for a birth or abortion.

⁵⁷ Ernest Hemingway to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Schruns, circa December 24, 1925, in *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Scribner, 1981), p. 180.

⁵⁸ Hemingway to Fitzgerald, circa December 24, 1925, pp. 180-81.

⁵⁹ Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, pp. 70-71.

⁶⁰ See James Steinke, "'Out of Season' and Hemingway's Neglected Discovery: Ordinary Actuality," *Hemingway's Neglected Short Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. Susan F. Beegel (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), p. 63, Joseph Flora, *Ernest Hemingway: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989), p. 32, and Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story*, p. 109.

⁶¹ Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story*, p. 109.

⁶² "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters."

⁶³ Hemingway and Plimpton, "The Art of Fiction XXI: Ernest Hemingway," p. 74.

⁶⁴ "The Caprices"

⁶⁵ Jean Adhémar, *The Caprices of Goya* (Paris: Fernand Hazan, 1951), pp. viii, xi.

⁶⁶ Warren Bennett, "The Poor Kitty and the Padrone and the Tortoise-shell Cat in 'Cat in the Rain'," *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham: Duke University Press: 1990), p. 251.

⁶⁷ John Walford, *Great Themes in Art* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002), p. 424, and Emily Stipe Watts, *Ernest Hemingway and the Arts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 168. Also see Hemingway, "On Writing," *The Nick Adams Stories* (New York: Scribner, 1972), pp. 239-40.

⁶⁸ Edmund Wilson, "Emergence of Ernest Hemingway," *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the 1920s and 1930s* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), p. 121.

⁶⁹ E. R. Hagemann, "'Only Let the Story End As Soon As Possible': Time-and-History in Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*," *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham: Duke University Press: 1990), p. 197.

⁷⁰ Sheldon Norman Grebstein, *Hemingway's Craft* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 2.

⁷¹ According to Cohen,
 the origins of this crime vignette . . . date to Hemingway's stint as a cub reporter on the Kansas City Star in 1917-18. A page-three story on 19 November 1917, which Hemingway may have written, headlined "Death Breaks up a Gang," describes an Italian gang's robbery of a cigar store and the subsequent shootings of two gang members by two police detectives.
 Cohen, *Hemingway's Laboratory*, p. 162.

⁷² Watts, *Hemingway and the Arts*, p. 137.

⁷³ See Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), pp. 32, 41, Robert M. Slabey, "The Structure of *In Our Time*," *Critical Essays on Ernest Hemingway's In Our Time*, ed. Michael S. Reynolds (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), pp. 76-87, Clinton S. Burhans, "The Complex Unity of *In Our*

Time,” *Critical Essays on Ernest Hemingway’s In Our Time*, ed. Michael S. Reynolds (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), p. 94, and Joseph Flora, *Hemingway’s Nick Adams* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), pp. 29-30.

⁷⁴ Larry Grimes, for instance, posited that George may be the father whereas G. Thomas Tanselle rejected the idea. See Grimes, *The Religious Design of Hemingway’s Early Fiction* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Research Press, 1985), pp. 55-56, and Tanselle, “Hemingway’s ‘Indian Camp,’” *Critical Essays on Ernest Hemingway’s In Our Time*, ed. Michael S. Reynolds (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), pp. 144-45.

⁷⁵ Ernest Hemingway, “Indian Camp,” manuscripts, folder 493, Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Hemingway, “Indian Camp,” manuscripts, folder 493, pp. 5-6.

⁷⁷ Hemingway said in a letter that the story was about the time he discovered his father, Clarence Hemingway, was a coward. Joseph Flora, *Ernest Hemingway: A Study of the Short Fiction*, pp. 18-19.

⁷⁸ Sheridan Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 28.

⁷⁹ Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story*, p. 127.

⁸⁰ Ernest Hemingway, “The End of Something,” manuscripts, folder 373, Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, p. 2.

⁸¹ In an essay on “Cross-Country Snow,” Olivia Carr Edenfield argued that Nick’s freedom is threatened by feelings of “sexual entrapment” rather than a broader sense of responsibility. Edenfield, “Doomed Biologically: Sex and Entrapment in Ernest Hemingway’s ‘Cross-Country Snow,’” *Hemingway Review*, 19, no. 1 (1999): 141-48.

⁸² Sherwood Anderson, "I Want to Know Why," *The Triumph of the Egg* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1921), pp. 5-20.

⁸³ Joseph Flora noted that Bugs is a man who "believes in the ritual of food." Flora, *Hemingway's Nick Adams*, p. 93.

⁸⁴ Young, *Hemingway: A Reconsideration*, p. 40.

⁸⁵ Hemingway, "A Way You'll Never Be," p. 52.

⁸⁶ Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, p. 72 and Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story*, p. 131.

⁸⁷ Kenneth G. Johnston, "Hemingway and Cézanne: Doing the Country," *American Literature* 56, no. 1 (1984): 34.

⁸⁸ Sheridan Baker, "Hemingway's Two-Hearted River," *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: Critical Essays*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), p. 157.

⁸⁹ See Tetlow, *Hemingway's In Our Time*, p. 14, and Wagner, *Hemingway and Faulkner*, p. 27.

⁹⁰ William Adair, "Hemingway's 'Out of Season': The End of the Line," *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham: Duke University Press: 1990), p. 343.

⁹¹ Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story*, p. 107.

⁹² Hemingway, "Old Constan," *By-Line*, pp. 53-54.

⁹³ Hemingway, "Refugees from Thrace," *By-Line*, p. 54.

⁹⁴ In addition to the innuendo of "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot," Hemingway wrote in a eulogistic tribute to Joseph Conrad that

it is agreed by most of the people I know that Conrad is a bad writer, just as it is agreed that T. S. Eliot is a good writer. If I knew that by grinding Mr. Eliot into a fine dry powder and sprinkling that powder over Mr. Conrad's grave Mr. Conrad would shortly appear, looking very annoyed at the forced return and commence writing I would leave for London early tomorrow morning with a sausage grinder.

Ernest Hemingway, "Conrad, Optimist and Moralist," *Transatlantic Review* 2, no. 3 (1924): pp. 341-42.

⁹⁵ Ernest Hemingway to Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Paris, 15 August 1924, in *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961*, p. 122.

⁹⁶ Ernest Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River: Part II," manuscripts, folder 274-2, Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, p. 90.

⁹⁷ Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story*, p. 63.

⁹⁸ Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River: Part II," folder 274-2, p. 85.

⁹⁹ Ernest Hemingway, "On Writing," pp. 233-41.

¹⁰⁰ Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 219.

¹⁰¹ Carol Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life* (New York: Scribner, 2009), p. 85.

CHAPTER 4

A CHEKHOV-HEMINGWAY AMALGAMATION: RAYMOND CARVER'S *CATHEDRAL*

Raymond Carver was, as Michael Gorra asserted, the “chief practitioner of what’s been called ‘American minimalism’ ” during the 1970s and 1980s, an important figure in the development of the mode.¹ Carver’s aesthetic began to take shape early in his life. His first wife, Maryann Burk Carver, wrote in her memoir that when he was seventeen, Raymond told her that “ ‘I’m going to be a writer, Maryann. A writer like Ernest Hemingway’ .”² His statement was prescient, perhaps an expression of his desire to achieve Papa’s fame as much as an allusion to the foundation of his future style. Despite his admiration for Hemingway and Literary Impressionist Anton Chekhov, the debate over whether Carver was a devotee of austere fiction throughout his career continues. Adam Meyer argued that “Carver’s membership in the minimalist fraternity has never been fully established” and that his second collection of stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, is more sparse than those that preceded and followed.³ Recent revelations have complicated Meyer’s analysis, however. William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll, editors of a collection of Carver’s work for The Library of America, maintained that the author’s long-time editor Gordon Lish was primarily responsible for the elliptical quality of *What We Talk About*.⁴ Biographer Carol Sklenicka described how Carver was far more protective of *Cathedral* and he did not allow Lish editorial free-rein.⁵ For this reason, the book is presumably more reflective of Carver’s “true” aesthetic. Despite Carver’s movement

towards lengthier tales and occasionally optimistic conclusions, *Cathedral* is an important part of the American Minimalist tradition.

Throughout his career, Carver's tendencies were consistent with the Minimalist mode. He was by many accounts inclined to cut words rather than add and to imply significant information rather than write expository passages. His early mentor John Gardner was an exacting editor who "deleted words, phrases, and sentences" with the understanding that his changes were non-negotiable.⁶ Carver maintained Gardner's standards when guiding his own students. Jay McInerney, who was one of Carver's pupils at Syracuse University, remembered that "manuscripts came back thoroughly ventilated with Carver deletions, substitutions, question marks, and chicken-scratch queries. I took one story back to him seven times; he must have spent fifteen or twenty hours on it. He was a meticulous, obsessive line editor."⁷ Like Hemingway and Cormac McCarthy, Carver was adept at removing unnecessary material. Maryann Burk Carver recalled that "he was a crack self-editor, objective and detached. If a story could be made better by cutting a scene he really liked or had enjoyed writing, he cut it. The effect of the whole story was more important, period."⁸ A comparison of the *Esquire* "Vitamins" with the version published in *Cathedral*, for example, illustrates Carver's inclinations: numerous sentences were deleted and many others changed.⁹

Carver omits, and in some cases withholds, key information from each tale in *Cathedral*, makes frequent allusions, and implies more than he explicitly reveals about his characters. His fiction also shows a profound debt to Literary Impressionism, likely attributable to his admiration for Chekhov.¹⁰ The narratives in *Cathedral* are not, however, as efficient as his previous works. In his discussion of the collection, Marc Oxoby maintained that "the stark minimalism of his [Carver's] early work gives way, by the time we get to *Cathedral*, to a richer,

more detailed style. Although they can still be considered minimalist, the stories are not pared down to the level of those in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Instead, as Bruce Weber has noted, they are ‘fuller, more generous and more optimistic’.”¹¹ Carver said in an interview that he had experienced an “opening up” while writing “Cathedral,” implying that his fresh approach was in part a response to being defined in a manner he disliked: “In a review of the last book, somebody called me a ‘minimalist’ writer. The reviewer meant it as a compliment. But I didn’t like it. There’s something about ‘minimalist’ that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don’t like.”¹² However, concepts such as pessimism, optimism, and “smallness of vision” are irrelevant to a definition of Carver’s style.

The narratives in *Cathedral* are “fuller” in that they are more developed and imagistically complex. They represent the peak of Carver’s abilities as a craftsman. “The Bath,” now thought to be Lish’s version of “A Small, Good Thing,” is shorter than the versions that followed but is not as implicative. Much material has been omitted, but this does not necessarily mean that “The Bath” is more Minimalistic. In his best fiction, Carver’s extreme efficiency is made possible by his frequent use of poetic techniques that imbue stark images with depth and complexity. For example, he often employs devices such as objective and imagistic correlatives. Like many authors working in the tradition, he was an accomplished poet, so his work often reflects the attributes of prose-poetry.¹³ Carver also adds layers of meaning to his fiction by subtly referring to autobiographical events; multiple works about Carver suggest that he often alluded to occurrences from his own life in his fiction. These facts provide crucial information about the implications of his work. “Cathedral,” for example, is based on the time Tess Gallagher’s blind friend Jerry Cariveau visited. Carver often constructs narrow epistemic parameters, focusing

with extreme precision on the few essential details revealed. His fiction seems more accessible, however, when placed within biographical context.

Carver's characters are a reflection of the kind of people he knew best. While some of them seem firmly middle-class, such as the Weisses from "The Bath" and "A Small Good Thing," many of the people who populate his narratives struggle financially. Carver was born to lower-middle class parents in Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1939. His father was a drinker with "a penchant for wandering" who labored in a sawmill, a place where Carver also worked in his early twenties.¹⁴ He was told during an interview that the people who populate his stories are "basically inarticulate," people who cannot "verbalize their plights" or "grasp what is happening to them." He responded that the reason this is so is because they are the types with whom he relates:

The things that have made an indelible impression on me are the things I saw in lives I witnessed being lived around me, and in the life I myself lived. These were lives where people really *were* scared when someone knocked on their door, day or night, or when the telephone rang; they didn't know how they were going to pay the rent or what they could do if their refrigerator went out.¹⁵

Many of his figures drink their days away, unable to see a way out of cycles of behavior involving alcohol and depression. *Cathedral* does not tell of heroes and adventures but of common men and women searching for meaningful relationships. *Cathedral* breaks from Carver's earlier collections, *What We Talk About* and *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, however, in that some of the tales that comprise the collection suggest the possibility of profound interaction, redemption, and hope.

The intimate interactions that take place at the end of stories such as “Cathedral” and “A Small, Good Thing” are sometimes catalyzed by a material belonging. Carver often invests mundane objects with emotional force in order to shape his primary themes, a technique common in Minimalist fiction. In his essay “On Writing,” he wrote about the way an everyday item can create emotional force: “It’s possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace language and to endow those things -- a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring -- with immense, even startling power.”¹⁶ In every tale in *Cathedral*, characters invest themselves in things that populate their daily lives, often attempting to use them as a way of connecting with others. It is a realistic artistic effect: commonplaces such as telephones and wristwatches are familiar and thus serve as the grounds for a range of actions and emotions.

In addition to his focus on individual objects and images, Carver also adhered to Hemingway’s Iceberg Principle. While he maintained that other authors did not have a direct influence on his writing, Carver said in an interview that he admired Hemingway’s fiction and referred to the Iceberg Principle:

Hemingway is an author whose work I admire greatly. I still go back and read his work with pleasure. You’re probably familiar with his comment comparing a literary work to an iceberg: nine-tenths of the iceberg is under water. But as long as the writer knows what he’s leaving out, that’s okay. If he’s just writing and doesn’t know that he’s leaving out crucial things, then that’s not so good. If you read Hemingway’s stories, you get just enough and no more.¹⁷

Each narrative in *Cathedral* was first published independently, and the majority of the earlier versions contain information that was later omitted.¹⁸ “Cathedral,” “Chef’s House,” and

“Vitamins” originally appeared in September, October, and November of 1981, and “A Small, Good Thing” was composed between 1979 and 1980.¹⁹ A considerable amount of text was deleted from “Vitamins” and “Where I’m Calling From,” and as a result they rely more on implication. In some instances, little was changed: “Preservation,” “The Train,” and “Feathers” appear much as they did in their earlier state. Some of the adjustments made from the journal and magazine publications to those that appear in *Cathedral* were ostensibly made to guard against confusion or overlap.²⁰ The final narrative in the book, “Cathedral,” was not radically changed. The fact that it provides the title for the entire collection is fitting given that it explicitly deals with a central, unifying concept: blindness.

“Cathedral” is based on an interaction Carver had with a blind man, although there are conflicting accounts of what specifically transpired between them. Citing what the author told him, Tom Jenks maintained that Carver had experienced the same basic events that occur in the story: a jealous husband is unsettled by the upcoming visit of his wife’s blind friend Robert, but the husband comes to understand the man better by drawing a cathedral with him while watching a late-night television program.²¹ Jerry Carriveau, who is the model for Robert, recalled visiting Carver and Tess Gallagher in Syracuse but contradicted some of Jenks’s assertions. While Carver used some of Carriveau’s characteristics in shaping his fictional counterpart, the events that occur at the end were fabricated. He said that he did not draw anything with Carver during the visit and maintained that he was “not good at following pen scratching or hand movements and would not have been able to do so on a paper bag with a subject as complicated as a cathedral.”²² Carver said that his inclination was to use things that have “really happened” or that he “overheard” as material for his stories but that he would also incorporate imagined scenarios: “Cathedral” seems to be no exception.²³

The story illustrates many of the technical similarities between Minimalism and Impressionism, primarily the relationship between perception and epistemic limitation. The oft-anthologized tale is a first-person retrospective narration, a crucial fact that most scholars tend to either miss or ignore.²⁴ The scholarship generally focuses on whether the narrator undergoes a clear epiphany in the end. The most fundamental, and perhaps important, fact about “Cathedral,” however, is that the present action of the piece is the act of the telling. The narrator’s temporal relationship with past events in part addresses why he is talking about them at all.

The most likely reason for the telling of the story is that the protagonist is recalling an occurrence that was personally and emotionally transformative, and “Cathedral” chronicles the unnamed narrator’s metamorphosis from prejudice to understanding. He recalls having a negative attitude about the entire idea of the visit, an event complicated by his own feelings of jealousy and inadequacy. He resents blindness, although he does not seem able to clearly express why. He is also fixated on the fact that his wife and Robert recorded tapes for each other and exchanged them through the mail and shared intimate details about their lives. The implication is that the man’s marriage is fragile.

Carver conveys the narrator’s perturbation by making him sound terse and reportorial, a technique Hemingway uses in “The Killers” and that Cormac McCarthy employs in *No Country for Old Men*. One of the most tension-filled moments in the latter occurs during a conversation between the murderous Anton Chigurh and a well-meaning convenience store clerk:

Will there be something else? the man said.

I dont know. Will there?

Is there something wrong?

With what?

With anything.

Is that what you're asking me? Is there something wrong with anything?²⁵

The less that is said, the more pointed the statement, the more menacing the tone. The two sections in "Cathedral" in which the narrator recalls the recordings, paradoxically, seem emotionless: "She wanted to talk. They talked. He asked her to send him a tape and tell him about her life. She did this. She sent the tape." The more he talks about the content of the conversations, the more reluctant he is to ponder the subject: "The blind man made a tape. He sent her the tape. She made a tape. This went on for years."²⁶ The anger that resides below the surface of the narration is driven by jealousy: the speaker has not achieved a meaningful connection with his wife the way Robert has. The tense atmosphere begins to dissipate, however, as the group eats and settles in for an evening by the television. Once Robert arrived at the house, the narrator relates how they quickly ate a big dinner then followed up by eating dessert, smoking dope, drinking, and watching a television program about cathedrals. Robert had no conception of what the churches looked like, so he asked the narrator if he would draw one with him. The two men drew the picture together, and it is this intimate action that reshaped the author's attitude.

The narrator's epiphany is rooted in the evolution of his perception. Mark A. R. Facknitz observed that "Carver redeems the narrator by releasing him from the figurative blindness that results in a lack of insight into his own condition and which leads him to trivialize human feelings and needs."²⁷ Carver said in an interview that he did not like to employ irony in his stories, but he does so in "Cathedral."²⁸ The protagonist describes himself as a person who was in the past emotionally disconnected from others, particularly his wife. He talks about her suicide attempt and previous marriage in a coldly analytical way, as if he can barely believe that it truly

happened. His problem is that he does not “see” his wife in the sense that he does not seek to understand who she is. The apparent difference between the men is that Robert, despite his physical lack of vision, is open to new experiences. When the narrator apologizes because there is nothing good on television except for a program about cathedrals, Robert’s reply illustrates the epistemic gap between the men: “ ‘Bub, it’s all right,’ the blind man said. ‘It’s fine with me. Whatever you want to watch is okay. I’m always learning something. Learning never ends. It won’t hurt me to learn something tonight. I got ears,’ he said” (222). Carver here alludes to Deuteronomy 29:4, “But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear,” accentuating the fundamental difference between the two men. The narrator lacks empathy because of his acute interpersonal limitations. He did not have “ears” or “eyes,” and this is the reason he did not “have *any* friends” (212). At no time during the narrative does the speaker explicitly acknowledge that he is in fact the “blind” person, but his willingness to talk about his experience with Robert suggests that he has become someone who is open, someone who finally has “eyes” and “ears.”

While spare prose is not central to Impressionism and serves as a means to differentiate it from Minimalism, epiphanic moments result from a shared stylistic tendency. Both modes emphasize the immediacy of sensory experience; narrators report occurrences and eschew explaining their moral or philosophical importance. The scene in which Robert and the narrator draw a cathedral together is synesthetic:

I put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses. I hung great doors. I couldn’t stop. The TV station went off the air. I put down the pen and closed and opened my fingers. The blind man felt around over the paper. He moved the tips of his fingers over the paper, all over what I had drawn, and he nodded (227).

The sensory intensity of the moment erases all concerns about time; raw sensation drives the action more than the external significance of the channel going off the air, which marks the passing of time. Removing any semblance of an intellectual explanation for what it all meant, the narrator at no point says anything coherent or specific about the meaning of his experience: all he can reveal is that “it was like nothing else in my life up to now” (228). The protagonist does not articulate this experience because in Minimalistic stories perception, or the reporting of raw sensory experience, supersedes the communication of a larger moral or philosophical lesson. In “Literary Impressionism and *In Our Time*,” James Nagel explained the connection between sensation and thematic development: “The themes of Impressionism dealt with a character coming to terms with the world, coming to understand it better through epiphanies, and struggling constantly with problems of truth and illusion.”²⁹ The narrator in “Cathedral” is only able to note a vague perceptual change. He does not completely comprehend why, but it is implied that for perhaps the first time he has wrestled with matters of “truth and illusion” and become more aware of a world outside of himself.

Despite integrating a subtle message about the consequences of emotional blindness, Carver was like one of the Literary Impressionists who influenced him, Chekhov, in that he did not want to use his fiction to force a political or moral lesson upon his audience. “Cathedral” is not, after all, a story about why individuals, or perhaps society in general, should be kinder and more sensitive to people who are blind. In *Literary Impressionism: James and Chekhov*, H. Peter Stowell described the technical stance of the Impressionist author, a description that applies equally well to Minimalist writers:

The impressionists’ belief in the primacy of perception forced the pose of the omniscient, didactic, and discursive author out of the work. He was replaced by

an elusive presence who allowed all characters to perceive for themselves the ambiguous and ultimately unknowable surfaces of sensory reality.³⁰

The narrator's epiphany in "Cathedral" is only possible because he treats the person he was in the past as a separate entity. His position is one of remembrance; he is thinking back to a previous state of "self." Time and distance have not, however, granted him the capacity to explain why he is different.

The implication, however, is that his perspective has shifted considerably. In the act of telling his story with openness, he shows a self-awareness that he seems to lack in the time before he meets Robert. Carver offers an abundance of evidence in the first paragraph that speaks to how the narrator has changed:

I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to (209).

Carver suggests that the visit has inspired the narrator to change. The man's blindness used to bother the protagonist, but it no longer does. His "idea of blindness" is not informed by the "movies" anymore but by having spent time with Robert and seeing that he is a human being. The most compelling difference is that the narrator now seems to "look forward" to seeing and spending time with his wife's friend. One critic said that what can be concluded about the narrator is "that his attitude toward Robert will be wholly different also, and that he has experienced an event that has the power to trigger the imagination."³¹ It is not that his view of the blind "will be" different: it already is. He has developed a spirit of welcoming where there was once a compulsion toward rejection.

Because the fiction in both modes tends to feature epiphanic moments, the interplay of rejection and acceptance frequently appears in Impressionistic and Minimalistic works, particularly in that of Chekhov.³² Chekhov's "The Grasshopper" is thematically similar to "Cathedral" as both are about perceptual and epistemic limitation. In each piece the narrator recounts the experiences of an emotionally estranged married couple, and each ends with one of the spouses coming to a moment of profound realization. "The Grasshopper" is about the marriage of Olga Ivanovna, a vivacious art-lover, and her dry, cerebral husband, Osip Stepanovich Dymov. While Olga flits around with her artist friends, her steady, unemotional husband time and again proves his love and devotion. He advances in his career, becoming a well-respected doctor. Craving passion and spontaneity, Olga has an affair with a painter, Ryabovsky, who ultimately tires of her and leaves. As do so many of Chekhov's fictions, it ends tragically.

Chekhov subtly develops a sense of irony as it becomes more apparent that for all the pleasure she takes in artists, clothing, and paintings, Olga, like the narrator in "Cathedral," is figuratively blind. She does not "see" the artistry and beauty in her husband's scientific pursuits. Dymov eventually dies because he foolishly sucks the pus from a diseased boy's sores, although his actions can be interpreted as self-sacrificial. Only after his death is Olga able to comprehend her husband's value, and her blindness is such that she is only able to have her epiphany after a family friend, Korostelev, delivers an impassioned appreciation of Dymov:

"Dying," he repeated in a high voice and again sobbed. "Dying, because he sacrificed himself. What a loss to science!" he said with bitter emphasis. "In comparison with all the rest of us he was a great man, a remarkable man. What a gift! What hopes he inspired in us all!" went on Korostelev, wringing his hands.

“My God, my God, he would have been such a scientist, such a rare scientist!

Osip Dymov, Osip Dymov, what have you done? Oh. God!”³³

Olga’s epiphany is not as subtle as that of the protagonist in “Cathedral,” but it is a moment in which she recognizes that her perception of him was limited:

Olga Ivanovna went back in memory over her whole life with him, from beginning to end, in the utmost detail, and suddenly realized that he really had been a remarkable man, an unusual man, a great man, in comparison with all the others she had known. And remembering the attitude to him of her late father, and of all his colleagues, she realized that they had all seen in him a future celebrity. The walls, the ceiling, the lamp and the carpet on the floor winked mockingly at her, as if trying to say: “You’ve missed your chance!” (89).

Olga’s thoughts shape her sensory experience in the epiphanic moment; in her mind she personifies the mundane objects in the room, perceiving them as derisive of her misperception. This is not, however, a moral issue: Chekhov does not indicate that Olga has done something “wrong.” She has instead missed an opportunity to live a life that could have been fuller and more expansive. The narrator does not, for example, imply that it is Olga’s infidelity that has caused Dymov’s death. If anything, “Cathedral” and “The Grasshopper” suggest that a lack of vision results in an isolation that leads to a poverty of the senses: life is not as rich as it *could* be. Chekhov implies that there is hope, however, because not everyone in Olga’s world has shared her fate. Others who saw Dymov’s ability differed from her by refusing to see beauty only in common mediums such as painting and sculpture. Carver and his fellow American Minimalists developed an aesthetic focused upon broadening ideas about what constitutes a “suitable” artistic subject.

“Cathedral” in many ways serves as the thematic model for the rest of the stories in the collection in that each involves figurative blindness. Kirk Nisset posited that the narratives that comprise *Cathedral* are linked by common themes of “insularity.”³⁴ While this is in many ways true, it is attributable to the stylistic influence of Chekhov and Literary Impressionism rather than thematic development alone. Sensory experience is limited, and it restricts the epistemic parameters of Carver’s characters. “Feathers” is essentially about the emotional expansions and constrictions caused by visual stimulus. The tale is about two couples who get together for dinner one evening. Jack and his wife Fran are childless, and their friends Bud and Olla have recently given birth. Fran is not particularly pleased to be going over to the other couple’s house but tries to make the most of it. With the meal nearing an end, Olla brings her son into the room. Upon sight, Jack says that “bar none, it was the ugliest baby I had ever seen. It was so ugly I couldn’t say anything” (20). He treats the child as an object rather than a human being, referring to Harold as “the ugly baby,” “the fat thing,” and several times as “it” (20-21, 23). Fran holds and plays with Harold at the dining room table, all the while growing attached to the idea of becoming a mother.

Jack and Fran’s decision to become parents turns out to be a disaster, primarily because neither is able to assess objectively whether, given their divergent mindsets, the idea of having a child is feasible or rational. Fran’s idealized vision of motherhood trumps the fact that Harold is an object that repels her partner. Years have passed after the dinner and Jack laments the changes that fatherhood has caused. “Feathers” ends with Jack remorsefully relating how Fran has quit her job, cut off her long blonde hair, and “gotten fat on me.” The theme of isolation arises in the final paragraph: “The truth is, my kid has a conniving streak in him. But I don’t talk about it. Not even with his mother. Especially her. She and I talk less and less as it is. Mostly it’s just the TV”

(26). What once seemed to be a wonderful prospect has brought about an end to meaningful communication.

The dramatic irony in “Feathers” is generated by Jack and Fran’s inability to see beyond the surface of their immediate experience. Because it is a retrospective narration, Jack can now talk about the past with a modicum of clarity. Their decisions are driven by visceral reactions rather than careful thought, perhaps best expressed by Fran’s insipid request that her spouse “fill” her “up with” his “seed” (25). Jack and Fran’s discontent stems from the pervasiveness of “ugliness,” the term that use to articulate the end of their one-time intimacy. Fran’s mind churns over what has become of her dreams and ambitions. In one of the most the most subtly harrowing scenes in the story, the husband describes how his wife rants at odd moments:

“Goddamn those people and their ugly baby,” Fran will say, for no apparent reason, while we’re watching TV late at night. “And that smelly bird,” she’ll say.

“Christ, who needs it!” Fran will say. She says this kind of stuff a lot, even though she hasn’t seen Bud and Olla since that one time (25-26).

The implication is that Fran has difficulty acknowledging her own culpability in what her life and marriage have become. Jack is unable to interpret the true problem, suggesting that the couple will remain in a common state of blindness.

Married couples with a limited, pessimistic view of their future are not rare in *Cathedral*. “Chef’s House” is similar to “Feathers” as it too ends with failure and isolation. The narrative is based on an episode between Raymond and Maryann Burk Carver that took place while their marriage was slowly dissolving, during which they shared a home in McKinleyville, California in the early weeks of Raymond’s sobriety.³⁵ Wes, a recovering alcoholic, has been given the use of a home near the ocean in the Pacific northwest by his friend Chef. He calls his ex-wife Edna

and asks her to join him. She leaves a male friend behind and she and her former husband share an idyllic time. Being in the house together brings order to Wes and Edna's lives:

Wes had a little money, so I didn't have to work. And it turned out Chef was letting us have the house for almost nothing. We didn't have a telephone. We paid the gas and light and shopped for specials at the Safeway. One Sunday afternoon Wes went out to get a sprinkler and came back with something for me. He came back with a nice bunch of daisies and a straw hat. Tuesday evenings we'd go to a movie. Other nights Wes would go to what he called his Don't Drink meetings (28).

This new life abruptly ends when Chef comes by to tell Wes that his sister, Linda, needs to move in. Edna tries to console Wes, but he is beyond hope. When she suggests that he could resume a relationship with their grown children, he replies that "it won't matter." The version of "Chef's House" that appeared in *The New Yorker* suggests that Wes feels time has gotten away from him: "But it won't matter then, (because I'll be so damned old it won't make any difference)" (43).³⁶ Unable to assuage her husband, Edna concludes her narration by saying that "There wasn't much else. We'll clean it up tonight, I thought, and that will be the end of it" (33). Leaving will be the end of Wes and Edna's revival as a couple.

Wes's problem is depicted as a lack of both optimism and vision. The narrator pays attention to Wes's eyes, and what the forlorn man sees is particularly meaningful. Geoffrey Wolff praised Carver for his deft use of this device, maintaining that "he knew better than anyone where his characters should look. I don't mean point of view. I mean where their eyes fall—what they see and what they don't see."³⁷ Once Wes determines that his sobriety is over, "he leaned back in the sofa, folded his hands in his lap, and closed his eyes." Edna continues her attempts to gain his attention, and finally "he opened his eyes. But he didn't look at me" (32). He

gazes “toward the window,” an interesting detail in that Edna does not speculate about what he is focusing upon, although she says earlier that the “clouds . . . were building up” over the ocean (31). Her reportorial mode of telling continues as she describes how he “got up and pulled the drapes and the ocean was gone just like that” (33). Wes’s decision to close off his physical view of the world outside, a “clouded” and uncertain “horizon,” serves as an imagistic correlative that represents the cessation of his hope. His actions also reflect a measure of theatricality: he has effectively ended the “act,” signifying that another, less fulfilling experience awaits.

The couple in “Preservation” is perhaps the most dysfunctional portrayed in *Cathedral*, far less genial than Wes and Edna, and their inability to communicate with one another is acute. The narrative is relatively simple in terms of plot, but the underlying tension is communicated by implication. Sandy’s husband feels powerless and directionless, and purchasing a refrigerator provides an unusual opportunity for him and his wife to interact. Finding a replacement becomes a potential point of connection but does not ultimately provide one. The dialogue accentuates the idea that Sandy and her husband reside in two separate worlds:

She glanced down at the paper, then at the food that had thawed. “I’ve got to fry pork chops tonight,” she said. “And I have to cook up that hamburger. And those sandwich steaks and the fish sticks. Don’t forget the TV dinners, either.”

“That goddamned Freon,” he said. “You can smell it.” (42)

It seems unlikely that the marriage will last. Sandy begins to think of her father and how he took her to auctions when she was a child: “She began missing her dad” (45). The narrator reveals that Sandy’s parents divorced and that her father had since died when carbon monoxide leaked into the compartment of a vehicle he had purchased at auction. Her husband does not see the grief she continues to feel, nor does he wish to participate in actions that will perhaps help Sandy to

resolve long-buried emotions. “Preservation” ends with Sandy thinking about making preparations to leave while she watches her husband stand barefoot in a puddle of melt-water.

Carver’s use of non sequiturs suggests that the couple do not have the imagination necessary to empathize with one another. Sandy does not recognize that her husband is suffering from a debilitated ego and that he does not comprehend that his wife wants to form a meaningful emotional connection. Carver illustrates the man’s figurative blindness early in the tale when the narrator describes how the unemployed roofer was reading

something called *Mysteries of the Past*. He held the book in front of him with both hands, his head inclined over the pages, as if he were being drawn in by what he was reading. But after a while she noticed that he didn’t seem to be making progress in it; he still seemed to be at about the same place—somewhere around chapter two, she guessed (36).

While it would seem that his lack of progress would be an apt metaphor for his life, that he is essentially bogged down and trapped on his couch, the implication is that his mind is overactive. He is fixating on something else, unable to expand the range of his thoughts to the degree that would allow him to discern a proper course of action. The book title alludes to the mysteries of his wife’s past, events that he is unable to understand due to his lack of interest in anything outside of his own, limited purview.

Carver’s manipulation of biographical events in the story that follows “Preservation,” “The Compartment,” suggests that he himself was at times blind to the emotional needs to his family. The tale is based on Raymond’s trip to Europe in the summer of 1982, during which he visited his son, Vance, who was living in Paris. Raymond marred his son’s childhood with his alcoholism, but they began a period of reconciliation in the late 1970s and early eighties. The

bitterness and negativity that Myers feels for his son in “The Compartment” caught Vance off guard when he first read the story, and he questioned why his father would take “an experience that ultimately cemented our reconciliation and, instead, turned it into such a dark, unsettling story.”³⁸ Vance’s observations about the narrative are insightful, and its disquieting qualities largely result from the complexity of the protagonist.

Myers craves insularity on a level that surpasses Sandy’s husband, a type of sensory deprivation that will shield him from the unfamiliar. While on a train trip to see his estranged son, he thinks about his divorce and an altercation he had with his boy. Some of Myers’s thoughts suggest that he prefers being by himself. For example, out of the window, he sees “a farmhouse and its outbuildings, everything surrounded by a wall” and determines that it “might be a good way to live—in an old house surrounded by a wall” (48).³⁹ The narrator also says, however, that Myers is “sorry he hadn’t arranged to be with a group. He was lonely” (51). His active thought-life is disrupted when he leaves his compartment to visit the bathroom. He returns to find that the “expensive Japanese wristwatch” he purchased for his son as a gift has been stolen (52).

The theft is the emotional turning point and indicates that the watch has become an important object in the fragile relationship between father and son. Myers grows angry with the other people on the train, derisively thinking of them as criminals and “foreigners” (54). Because of his lack of vision, he does not comprehend that *he* is the foreigner; he does not demonstrate a knowledge of local languages or customs. When Myers arrives at his destination, Strasbourg, he is too angry to meet his progeny and stays onboard. “The Compartment” ends with Myers losing his suitcase and continuing on to an unknown destination because he has moved to a car that is detached and transferred. He does not know what he is doing or where he is going.

Unlike “The Compartment,” “A Small, Good Thing” ends with a moment of redemption, the first story in *Cathedral* to end with a tincture of optimism. The long-held belief about the tale is that it is an expansion of “The Bath,” which first appeared in *What We Talk About*.⁴⁰ A new thesis has emerged, however, that suggests that “A Small, Good Thing” was in fact the “true” first version and was whittled down by Lish into what was released as “The Bath.” Stull and Carroll published the initial version in *Beginners*, which they maintain is how it would have appeared in *What We Talk About* if not for Lish.⁴¹ Removing Carver’s editor from the process by comparing the three published renderings, however, reveals that Carver’s tendency was to cut, rather than add, material. Most importantly, each version is Minimalistic.

In all three renderings of “A Small, Good Thing,” the basic plot is the same. It begins with Ann Weiss buying a cake for her son Scotty’s birthday party. On the morning of the celebration, the young man is struck by a car in a “hit and run.” Howard, Anne’s husband, joins his wife at the hospital. At first Scotty only seems shaken, but eventually he slips into a coma. His mother and father stay by his bedside, hoping that he will wake up. When they make separate trips home, they receive cryptic, unnerving calls from an unknown person. The terse, clipped exchanges that mark the calls generate an accretive sense of menace:

“Yes!” she said as she answered. “Hello!”

“Mrs. Weiss,” a man’s voice said. It was five o’clock in the morning, and she thought she could hear machinery or equipment of some kind in the background.

“Yes, yes! What is it?” she said. “This is Mrs. Weiss. This is she. What is it please?” She listened to whatever it was in the background. “Is it Scotty, for Christ’s sake?”

“Scotty,” the man’s voice said. “It’s about Scotty, yes. It has to do with Scotty, that problem. Have you forgotten about Scotty?” the man said. Then he hung up (75).

Carver implies much within the dialogue. Ann’s second set of lines implies that the caller remains silent while she implores him to speak, heightening her panic. He is an adept manipulator of emotions, and the scene is dramatically ironic because he does not know that the boy he is talking about is on the verge of death. Scotty eventually dies, fulfilling Anne and Howard’s worst fears. They find a form of release and safety in the end, however, when they confront the threatening baker.

The focus of the first part of “A Small, Good Thing” is upon the interaction between Ann and Howard, but the primary action takes place in the last third when the Weisses confront the baker, the man who has been making the frightening and untimely calls. Ann initiates the trip to the bakery and shapes what happens when she and her husband arrive:

“I know bakers work at night,” Ann said. “They make phone calls at night, too. You bastard,” she said.

The baker continued to tap the rolling pin against his hand. He glanced at Howard. “Careful, careful,” he said to Howard.

“My son’s dead,” she said with a cold, even finality. “He was hit by a car Monday morning. We’ve been waiting with him until he died. But, of course, you couldn’t be expected to know that, could you? Bakers can’t know everything—can they, Mr. Baker? But he’s dead. He’s dead, you bastard!” (86)

Ann’s raw emotions serve as the catalyst for the baker’s apology and his eventual redemption. Carver deleted a line that reinforces the religious overtones of the scene when preparing “A

Small, Good Thing” for publication in *Cathedral*: “ ‘But I’m deeply sorry. I’m sorry for your son, and I’m sorry for my part in this. (Sweet, sweet Jesus,)’ the baker said. He spread his hands out on the table and turned them over to reveal his palms.”⁴² Even though the Weisses will grieve the loss of their son for many years, their ability to forgive provides reason for hope. The baker is not the only person who needs to be forgiven: Ann and Howard will at some time have to offer their forgiveness to Scotty’s unknown murderer if they are to move beyond the tragedy emotionally.

The *Beginners* version of “A Small, Good Thing” is the “fullest” in terms of length. The word count is irrelevant, however, in determining whether a work is Minimalistic. Carver deleted many lines or made changes that resulted in more concise, mellifluous prose. Some adjustments also suggest that Carver became more reportorial, focusing more on images and actions than on intellectual synthesis. A paragraph about Howard Weiss illustrates Carver’s shift in approach. In the initial rendering, “Howard drove home from the hospital. He took the wet, dark streets faster than he should have, then caught himself and slowed down.” The second sentence is reformulated in *Ploughshares* and *Cathedral*: “He took the wet, dark streets very fast, then caught himself and slowed down” (62). The phrase “than he should have” is a judgment from the narrator rather than a projection of Howard’s thoughts, a reproach leveled at a man who is acting recklessly moments after his son has been injured by a careless driver. By removing the line, the narrator becomes more self-effacing and maintains an objective stance. The focus remains on Howard, who by catching himself implies that he is thinking about his son’s circumstances with a heightened level of sensitivity. Later in the same paragraph, Carver originally wrote, “he shouldn’t have left the hospital, he shouldn’t have, he cursed himself.”⁴³ In the later forms, he

writes, “he shouldn’t have left the hospital, he shouldn’t have. ‘Goddamn it!’ he said” (62).

Carver elects to show rather than tell, again lessening the “presence” of the narrator.

Carver was similarly vigilant in his editing of “Vitamins.” Narrated by a protagonist whose actions are consistently self-serving and reprehensible, the central character seems an unrepentant version of the redeemed baker. The protagonist’s girlfriend, Patti, sells vitamins and he works nights cleaning floors at a hospital. The details about their respective occupations are biographical: Carver worked as a night janitor at Mercy Hospital in Sacramento, California while his wife Maryann was building a successful career in sales with Parents Magazine Cultural Institute.⁴⁴ Maryann’s fictional counterpart grows overly attached to her product, and it becomes apparent as the plot progresses that her addictions, coupled with the narrator’s indifference to her, is damaging her life:

“I’m my only customer,” she said. “I think taking all these vitamins is doing something to my skin. Does my skin look okay to you? Can a person get overdosed on vitamins? I’m getting to where I can’t even take a crap like a normal person.”

“Honey,” I said.

Patti said, “You don’t care if I take vitamins. That’s the point. You don’t care about anything. The windshield wiper quit this afternoon in the rain.

I almost had a wreck. I came this close” (98).

Because of her limited perception, Patti abuses something that is supposed to make her healthier. After this exchange, the narrator proves Patti’s statements about him to be true as he continues on his own pathetic downward-spiral. While on a date with Patti’s co-worker Donna, he drinks RC Cola and whiskey at a bar called the Off-Broadway and barely avoids a physical

confrontation with a drunk Vietnam veteran named Nelson (99, 107). The former soldier at one point reveals that he has kept an enemy ear as a memento, an object that has become desiccated and shriveled. Kirk Nasset described it as an “emblem” of a “general deafness” that affects other characters in *Cathedral*.⁴⁵ After returning home, the protagonist completes his descent. In the final paragraph he fumbles around in the medicine chest and recalls that he “knocked down some more things. I didn’t care. Things kept falling” (109). The narrator’s final words presumably describe the trajectory of his future.

Unable to help himself or accept help from the equally apathetic Patti, the protagonist in “Vitamins” seems hopeless. Like “Cathedral,” however, the tale is a retrospective. The speaker’s admission that he “didn’t care” suggests that he is looking back on past events having learned something from his experiences. The same cannot be said for Lloyd, the central figure in the narrative that follows “Vitamins.” A darkly humorous story, “Careful” is about a man who suffers from some of the same feelings of worthlessness as Wes and Patti. Inez, Lloyd’s wife, has initiated a separation and asked her husband to move out. He has found a makeshift apartment with low, slanted ceilings. He drinks champagne throughout the narrative, ironic because it is something generally associated with luxury and celebration. He is living alone because Inez asked him to assess his condition and begin a recovery. Douglas Unger, Carver’s brother-in-law, said in an interview that “Careful” is based on actual events:

Ray had rented a small apartment on Castro Street in San Francisco. Just like in “Careful,” which describes that apartment exactly, Ray had somehow convinced himself that if he only drank champagne, he’d be able to taper off and quit. He’d go out in the morning and buy bottles of the cheapest Andre, but this wasn’t working and he knew it. At that point, everyone had given up hope.⁴⁶

Lloyd is under many illusions, and Unger's recollection suggests that Carver's fictional counterpart drinks champagne under the mistaken notion that it will help him wean himself off of alcohol.

As the narrative progresses, however, Carver suggests that Lloyd's central problem is his metaphorical blindness, a state resulting from his inability to listen. Inez apparently remains supportive, a fact suggested by her willingness to visit him in the first place. She arrives to find that her husband's ear is stopped up and he is unable to hear normally. Even though he is disheveled, he is comforted to have her near him, likely because "she knew everything there was to know about him" (115). She pours baby oil into his ear and cleans out whatever is causing the problem. Despite Inez's caring and attention, the end of "Careful" does not offer evidence of a bright future for the couple. Even though Lloyd can hear, he is not in any better position to communicate with his spouse. Although it is only around three o'clock in the afternoon, he is petrified of going to sleep, so he pops the cork off of a fresh bottle to help suppress his fears. The object of Inez's ire provides Lloyd temporary relief from overwhelming emotions.

Markedly different from "Careful" and "Vitamins," "Where I'm Calling From" is told from the perspective of a man trying to rejuvenate himself by achieving sobriety. The relationships depicted are not in the process of ending: they have already been damaged, though not irreversibly. "Where I'm Calling From" is narrated in first person by an unnamed speaker in present tense. Because Carver does not give him a name, the story seems to primarily be about Joe Penny, referred to as "J. P." The two men are in "Frank Martin's drying-out facility" somewhere in the mountains across the valley from where "Jack London used to have a big place" (137). On two different occasions in 1977, Carver was a resident in a similar facility called Duffy's, located in Calistoga, California.⁴⁷ While the speaker and J. P. sit on the front

porch, the narrator coaxes him into telling him how he came to be at Frank Martin's. J. P. talks about how he met his wife, fell in love, had children, and a decent life: "I had everything I wanted. I had a wife and kids I loved, and I was doing what I wanted to do with my life." For an unrevealed reason, his "drinking picks up" (133). Eventually, he and his wife became violent with one another. She found a boyfriend, and her father and brother had to haul the drunken J. P. in for recovery.

"Where I'm Calling From" is a powerful testament to the disruptive nature of alcohol addiction, and it suggests that healing in part depends upon an expansion of vision. J. P. and the narrator's common need to rid themselves of it that brings them closer together. Kirk Nessel maintained that it is "listening, and the imagination required for close listening" that allows the narrator to approach "the heart of his own problems."⁴⁸ Frank Martin's is a voluntary facility; the two men are free to leave at any time. The optimistic mood is linked to the idea that J. P. and the narrator have recognized their failures and taken a step toward rehabilitation and reconnection with their loved ones. Carver cut part of Frank Martin's "sermon" before publishing the story in *Cathedral*. The speech implies the tenuous nature of the two men's prospects: "(But we could have helped Jack London, if we'd been here in those days. And if he'd let us. If he'd asked for our help. Hear me? Like we can help you. *If. If* you ask for it and *if* you listen.) End of sermon."⁴⁹ Even without the excised section, J. P. and the narrator appear to have the option to choose sobriety and a place in society. The thematic emphasis in "Where I'm Calling From" is upon the possibility of redemption, a product of grace only obtained by those who have "ears to hear."

Many of the figures that populate Carver's stories seem to lack the capacity to comprehend the perspectives of others or empathize with those they have hurt. "The Train"

features a character, Miss Dent, who is unlike the men in “Where I’m Calling From” in that she violently acts out as a means to be seen, heard, and, perhaps most importantly, understood. Used and forgotten, she can no longer abide her state of figurative invisibility. The content of the narrative is different from the others in *Cathedral*; Carver wrote it as a “sequel” to a tale by John Cheever called “The Five-Forty-Eight.” For this reason, it is one of Carver’s most literarily allusive pieces. The confrontation between Miss Dent and her former boss, Mr. Blake, occurs in Cheever’s tale, so it takes place “off-stage” within the context of “The Train.” “The Five-Forty-Eight” features a fairly basic plot. Miss Dent, a dreamy and delusional young woman, follows Blake home after he leaves his office, and he has a flashback to their relationship while he attempts to evade her. He recalls that she began working for him as his secretary. Even though she is plain and he is put out by the ugliness of her handwriting because of his own compulsive eccentricities, he pursues her and they have a brief affair. The narrator implies that Blake loses all respect for Miss Dent once he has had sex with her, so he has her fired. Every detail offered about him suggests that he is a shallow individual, a man who cares only for himself and for surface appearances. During the train trip back to his home in Shady Hill, Miss Dent threatens him with a gun. Once they arrive at his stop, she follows him out of the car and exacts her vengeance upon him by making him listen to what she has to say.

Although Blake is mentioned only as “a man” in “The Train,” he is in many ways similar to Carver’s other isolated, misanthropic personae. In Cheever’s narrative, Blake’s narcissism contributes to his profoundly impoverished imagination, which in turn causes him to lack any semblance of empathy. Three darkly humorous scenes illustrate his lack of caring. In the first, the smitten Miss Dent places a rose on Blake’s desk, but “he had dropped it into the wastebasket. ‘I don’t like roses,’ he told her.”⁵⁰ Shortly after he has had a one-night stand with Miss Dent, “he

called personnel and asked them to fire her,” opting not to confront her himself.⁵¹ Blake’s blindness to the emotions of others is perhaps best illustrated, however, in his treatment of his own wife, Louise. The narrator recounts how

Blake had come home one night, overworked and tired, and had found that Louise had done nothing about getting supper. He had gone into the kitchen, followed by Louise, and had pointed out to her that the date was the fifth. He had drawn a circle around the date on the kitchen calendar. “One week is the twelfth,” he had said. “Two weeks will be the nineteenth.” He drew a circle around the nineteenth. “I’m not going to speak to you for two weeks,” he had said. “That will be the nineteenth.” She had wept, she had protested, but it had been eight or ten years since she had been able to touch him with her entreaties.⁵²

The final sentence suggests that Blake has for many years closed himself off from others, hearing but not listening and watching without seeing. Carver’s Miss Dent is a menacing figure who has attempted to break through Blake’s sensorial barricade: “she tried to make him see that he couldn’t keep trampling on people’s feelings” (147). Cheever offers no indication, however, that Blake’s experience with Miss Dent has done anything to reshape his perspective.

In “The Train,” Miss Dent’s actions imply that she is an imaginative figure with the capacity for further development. After her confrontation with Blake, during which she forces him to “put” his “face in the dirt,” she stashes the firearm in her handbag and initiates her late-night departure by heading to the station. Her purse becomes a source of power, and it emboldens her in the wake of her experience with her former boss. While waiting, she is joined by a woman and an older man who have apparently left a gathering of an unusual “tribe” of characters, including a “young girl” and “that imbecile they call Captain Nick” (150). The

woman grows aggressive towards Miss Dent, resenting the fact that she is not alone with her companion. As the tension between the woman and Miss Dent escalates, the purse increasingly signifies danger; it represents the capacity for violence because it contains the gun. The narrator focuses upon the handbag, careful to report each time Ms. Dent looks at it or moves it: she “released her grasp on the handbag and moved it from her lap to a place next to her on the bench. She stared at the catch on the handbag” (150). The woman uses the bag as a means of identification and derision: “ ‘Is this woman going to worry about you? Is this woman with the handbag going to worry about you?’ she said, stopping long enough to glare at Miss Dent” (151). It is the thing that Miss Dent wishes to identify herself with; in the moment before the train arrives, she “gathered herself to speak. She wasn’t sure where to begin, but she thought she might start by saying that she had a gun in her handbag” (154). Tired of being bullied by the woman, she considers violence for a second time as a means of gaining respect. Her method of escape arrives, however, alleviating the threat of continued confrontation.

The raw confidence displayed by Miss Dent is uncommon in Carver’s stories. Many of his figures, such as Wes and Lloyd, tend to resign themselves to living lives marked by defeat and faded potential. In “Fever,” a high school art teacher and father of two named Carlyle proves similar to Miss Dent in that he must summon the courage necessary to confront an antagonistic figure. His former spouse, Eileen, is nothing like Mr. Blake, however, as she is not coldly misanthropic. Carlyle’s initial quandary is that school is beginning again and he needs someone to watch his children. He loves and misses his wife, and at first he is unwilling to separate himself from her emotionally. Complicating his catharsis is the fact that she frequently calls him. Carlyle and Eileen view the phone in different ways: he dreads it while she feels that it is her way of helping him in her absence. Oddly, Eileen does help him through their conversations. She

insists that talking will help both of them move on: “ ‘We have to stay in touch,’ Eileen said. ‘We have to keep all lines of communication open. I think the worst is over. For both of us. I’ve suffered, too. But we’re going to get what we’re supposed to get out of this life, both of us, and we’re going to be made *stronger* for it in the long run’ ” (168). Carlyle does not share her opinion at first. At one point, the phone rings and he tells his girlfriend, Carol, “I know it’s her. She’s losing her mind. She’s going crazy. I’m not going to answer it” (175). But he is grateful that speaking with Eileen brought him into contact with Mrs. Webster, a steady and dependable woman who cares for his kids. Seeing Mr. and Mrs. Webster’s interactions helps Carlyle, in part, to shed his own blindness and recognize that his life with Eileen is over and that he must “let her go” (186). “Fever” is similar to “Cathedral” because both are about men who experience a transformation by casting off old feelings and attitudes and adopt new ones.

“The Bridle” does not conclude with the same level of certainty as “Fever.” The tale begins and ends with a family attempting to flee from self-imposed hardships. The story is an illustration of the proverb “no matter where you go, there you are.” Holits and his wife Betty have moved to Arizona from Minnesota to start over. They rent an apartment, and the complex manager’s wife, Marge, is the narrator. The family’s deterioration was set into motion when Holits became involved in horse-racing; he purchased a horse and named it “Fast Betty.” The implication is that he lost his family’s farm through a series of bad bets and neglect. In the version of the “The Bridle” that appeared in the July, 1982 edition of *The New Yorker*, Betty tells the narrator that “at the time, it didn’t seem like he was letting any of the other things go.”⁵³ This line was deleted from the version that appears *Cathedral*, and it is an important omission. The suggestion is that the farm was squandered, in part, because Holits was not fulfilling his duties.

Betty and Holits's marriage is marred by unresolved tension; it becomes apparent early in the tale when she remarks to the narrator that "he knows everything there is about horses" (189). Her resentment towards him is complex, stemming from his inability to acknowledge the sacrifices she has made in an attempt to salvage their relationship. Carver offered additional reasons for marital tension in his first rendering. Betty tells the narrator that "Holits and I have been married for eight years, going on nine. We couldn't have any children. We tried. It must be my fault." She goes on to add, "but that's the way it goes. Those that want to can't. And, sometimes, them that can shouldn't."⁵⁴ Carver's omission is significant, but he includes lines that imply Betty maintains a conciliatory maternal drive. Holits has two sons from a previous marriage and Betty insists that "I love them like they were my own" (198). The implication is that she is willing to compromise and adapt to make their relationship work, but he is rigid in his approach to his wife, a state suggested by the fact that he has kept Fast Betty's bridle.

Despite Betty's deference to her wayward husband, the Holits's marital problems deepen. Betty works ceaselessly as a waitress while he sits at home, presumably doing nothing. Reminiscent of Sandy's husband in "Preservation," he has lost his sense of purpose. He begins to drink. During an impromptu pool party, he tries to jump from the top of a pool house into the water. It is ambiguous whether he is trying to kill himself or miscalculates, but he lands on his head and suffers a serious injury. Shortly after the incident, the family moves out of the apartment. When the narrator goes up to clean the place, she finds the bridle has been left behind: "It must have been passed over in their hurry. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe the man left it on purpose." She also thinks of the object's relationship to Betty: "But I know that one part fits in the mouth. That part's the bit. . . . The bit's heavy and cold. If you had to wear this thing between your teeth, I guess you'd catch on in a hurry. When you felt it pull, you'd know it was

time. You'd know you were going somewhere" (208). It is ambiguous whether the end signifies that Betty will now be able to live life on her own terms.

Uncertainty is prominent in Carver's work, and it often results from limited vision. Because of its sparse, implicative prose and acutely defined epistemic parameters, Carver's fiction reflects the convergence of Hemingway and Chekhov's styles. He was not the "father" of the Minimalist tradition, but his contribution to its development is significant. Carver's legacy as an important stylist has nothing to do with his choice of subject matter or the length of his narratives. Much has been written about whether his works are optimistic, pessimistic, dark, and hopeful, and what that means in terms of how his oeuvre is categorized, but Carver's legacy illustrates that American Literary Minimalism is not defined by a specific type of content. He had a unique ability to examine profound themes through simple plots and seemingly superficial characters. His language is spare but precise, evidence of his devotion to craft. Identifying beauty in the mundane, Carver demonstrated that everyday experiences can be unexpectedly meaningful.

Notes

¹ Michael Gorra, review of *Cathedral* by Raymond Carver, *The Hudson Review* 37 (Spring, 1984): 155.

² Maryann Burk Carver, *What It Used to Be Like: A Portrait of my Marriage to Raymond Carver* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2006), p. 10.

³ Adam Meyer, "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism," *Critique* 30 (Summer 1989): 239.

⁴ In the note to *Beginners*, Stull and Carroll published a letter in which Carver requests that Lish to stop production of the book because the stories have been over-edited. Lish did not acquiesce. See Raymond Carver, *Carver: Collected Stories*, ed. William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll (New York: The Library of America, 2009), pp. 990-98.

⁵ Carol Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life* (New York: Scribner, 2009), pp. 397-98.

⁶ Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, p. 69.

⁷ Jay McInerney, "Raymond Carver, Mentor," *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver* (Santa Barbara: Capra, 1993), p. 24.

⁸ Maryann Burk Carver, *What It Used to Be Like*, p. 236.

⁹ See Raymond Carver, "Vitamins" *Esquire* 96 (October 1981): 130, 132, 134-39.

¹⁰ Carver's close friend Richard Ford said that "Ray had a passion and reverence for literature, and particularly for Chekhov." Sam Halpert, "Richard Ford," . . . *when we talk about Raymond Carver* (Layton: Gibbs Smith, 1991), p. 147.

¹¹ Marc Oxoby, "The Voluminous Impact of Television in the Fiction of Raymond Carver," *New Paths to Raymond Carver: Critical Essays on His Life, Fiction, and Poetry*, ed. Sandra Lee Kleppe and Robert Miltner (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2008), p. 108. Oxoby cited Bruce Weber, "Raymond Carver: A Chronicler of Blue-Collar Despair," *New York Times Magazine* (June 24, 1984), pp. 36-50.

¹² Lewis Buzbee and Mona Simpson, "Raymond Carver," *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 44.

¹³ Douglas Unger opined that Carver may have even preferred writing poetry over prose: I think writing poetry, more than fiction, was his first love. I don't believe that, after Ray was turned down for financial aid as a young poet that year at Iowa, that he ever gave up his youthful dream of being accepted by the world as a poet. Poetry, more than fiction, was an obsession for him. If he had a choice between writing a story or a poem—if writers really have that kind of choice—I think he'd favor the poem.

Halpert, "Douglas Unger," . . . *when we talk about Raymond Carver*, p. 59.

¹⁴ Michael Schumacher, "After the Fire, Into the Fire: An Interview with Raymond Carver," *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 215.

¹⁵ Sinda Gregory and Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with Raymond Carver," *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 110.

¹⁶ Raymond Carver, "On Writing," *Call If You Need Me*, ed. William L. Stull (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 89.

¹⁷ Lisa McElhinny and Robert Pope, "Raymond Carver Speaking," *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 17. Carver's comments about the influence of other authors appears in "Fires," *Call If You Need Me*, p. 93.

¹⁸ The earlier versions of Carver's stories first appeared in a variety of journals and literary periodicals: "The Bridle," *The New Yorker* 58 (July, 1982): 30-39; "Careful," *Paris Review* 25 (Summer 1983): 222-34; "Cathedral," *The Atlantic Monthly* 248 (September, 1981): 23-29; "Chef's House" *The New Yorker* 57 (November 30, 1981): 42-43; "The Compartment" *Antioch Review* 41 (Spring 1983): 133-41; "Feathers" *The Atlantic Monthly* 250 (September, 1982): 62-69; "Fever," *North American Review* 268 (June, 1983): 11-19; "Preservation," *Grand Street* 2 (Spring 1983): 7-16; "A Small, Good Thing," *Ploughshares* 8, nos. 1-2 (1982): 213-40; "The Train," *Antaeus* 49/50 (Spring/Summer 1983): 151-57; "Vitamins," *Esquire*; "Where I'm Calling From," *The New Yorker* 58 (March 15, 1982): 41-48, 51.

¹⁹ Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, p. 499.

²⁰ In "Fever," Carlyle's son Keith was originally named "Franklin." Franklin is the name of the other injured young man in "A Small, Good Thing." The character Spuds in "The Bridle" was originally named "Chef." In the original version of "Vitamins," the "kleptomaniac" salesgirl Pam was named Sandy. Sandy is the protagonist in "Preservation."

²¹ Tom Jenks, "Shameless," *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver*, ed. William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1993), p. 142.

²² Quoted in Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, p. 371.

²³ David Sexton, "David Sexton Talks to Raymond Carver," *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p.132.

²⁴ Arthur F. Bethea, Arthur M. Saltzman, Mark A. R. Facknitz, Nelson Hathcock, Peter Middleton, and Kennedy incorrectly discuss the narrative as if Robert's visit takes place in the narrator's present. See Bethea, *Technique and Sensibility in the Fiction of Raymond Carver* (New York: Routledge, 2001) pp. 154-56; Mark A. R. Facknitz, "'The Calm,' 'A Small Good Thing,' and 'Cathedral': Raymond Carver and the Rediscovery of Human Worth," *Studies in Short Fiction* 23 (Fall 1986): 287-96; Arthur M. Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 151-54; Peter Middleton, "High Visibility: Images of Ethical Life in The Tragic Muse and Raymond Carver's 'Cathedral'," *Rethinking History* 2, no. 3 (1998): 331-38; Nelson Hathcock, "'The Possibility of Resurrection': Re-Vision in Carver's 'Feathers' and Cathedral'," *Studies in Short Fiction* 28 (Winter 1991): 31-39.

²⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 53.

²⁶ Raymond Carver, "Cathedral," *Cathedral* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 211. All subsequent references are from the same edition.

²⁷ Facknitz, "'The Calm,'" p. 293.

²⁸ This was a contentious issue to Carver. He said in an interview that he did not in his stories want to create a dynamic that positions himself and the reader on the inside and his character on the outside:

The Bloomsbury Review: Some critics believe that if there's one thing uniting these writers and setting them apart from other postmoderns, it's their distaste for irony. Does that ring true to you?

Raymond Carver: I think they mean that these writers, the so-called "minimalists," are not ironists in the sense that there are no secrets between the sophisticated writer and the writer's sophisticated audience. And I would agree with them there. I see irony as a sort of pact or compact between the writer and the reader in that they know more than the characters do. The characters are set up and then they're set down again in some sort of subtle pratfall or awakening. I don't feel any such complicity with the reader. I'm not talking down to my characters, or holding them up for ridicule, or slyly doing an end run around them.

In the context of "Cathedral," it is difficult to take Carver's statement at face value. But the story is remarkable in that it does not evoke a sense of animus towards the narrator. His blindness, in other words, is understandable. Raymond Carver and William L. Stull, "Matters of Life and Death," *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 185.

²⁹ James Nagel, "Literary Impressionism and *In Our Time*," *The Hemingway Review* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 19.

³⁰ H. Peter Stowell, *Literary Impressionism: James and Chekhov* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 17.

³¹ Ewing Campbell, *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1992), pp. 65-66.

³² Carver and Chekhov have been compared, although none of the critical work addresses the Russian author as an Impressionistic influence. Carver's late short story "Errand" is about Chekhov's death. The piece is biographical in tone, as if the narrator is analyzing the life and philosophies of Chekhov as they were in his final days. The structure of "Errand" is unconventional, however, in that the second half deals more with the sensory experiences of those directly involved with Chekhov's death, particularly a young hotel worker who is asked to perform the eponymous errand by finding a mortician to handle the late author's body. "Errand," *Elephant and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 111-24. For a discussion of the similarities between Carver and Chekhov, see Charles E. May, "Chekhov and the Modern Short Story," *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 199-217 and Kerry McSweeney, *The Realist Short Story of the Powerful Glimpse: Chekhov to Carver* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007). During an interview with Robert Pope and Lisa McElhinny, Carver offered one of his most often-quoted statements about Chekhov:

I'm a great admirer of Chekhov's short stories, and I will borrow from Chekhov at the risk of parody. I'll borrow something that he said. He divides works of literature into two classes -- things he likes and things he doesn't like. I really don't have any theories for writing stories. I know what I like. I know what I don't like. I don't like dishonesty in writing. I don't like tricks. I like an honest story, well told. No matter if there's romance in the story or whatever.

McElhinny and Pope, "Raymond Carver Speaking," *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, p. 16.

³³ Anton Chekhov, "The Grasshopper," *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*, ed. Ralph E. Matlaw, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 89. All subsequent references are to the same edition.

³⁴ See Chapter 3 of Kirk Nessel, *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), pp. 51-71.

³⁵ See Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, p. 312.

³⁶ The deleted line is in parentheses.

³⁷ Halpert, "Geoffrey Wolff," . . . *when we talk about Raymond Carver*, p. 111.

³⁸ Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, pp. 384-86, 410.

³⁹ Saltzman wrote at length about Myers's preoccupation with "inviolability." He did not, however, take into account Myers's regret over traveling alone (131-33).

⁴⁰ Carver ostensibly promulgated the faulty compositional history when he wrote "this story is expanded and revised from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*" at the bottom of the version of "A Small, Good Thing" published in *Ploughshares*. See Carver, "A Small, Good Thing," *Ploughshares*, p. 213.

⁴¹ See note 2. Raymond Carver, "A Small, Good Thing," *Beginners, Carver: Collected Stories*, ed. William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll (New York: The Library of America, 2009), pp. 804-30.

⁴² Carver, "A Small, Good Thing," *Ploughshares*, p. 238. This line is also included in the *Beginners* version.

⁴³ Carver, "A Small, Good Thing," *Beginners, Carver: Collected Stories*, p. 806.

⁴⁴ Halpert, "Maryann Burk Carver," . . . *when we talk about Raymond Carver*, p. 91. Burk Carver wrote in her memoir that Raymond became resentful of her success and one day said that she had to choose between her job and her marriage. This led to what Burk Carver called a "prolonged sales slump." Maryann Burk Carver, *What It Used to Be Like*, p. 206.

⁴⁵ Kirk Nessel, *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study*, p. 64.

⁴⁶ Halpert, "Douglas Unger," . . . *when we talk about Raymond Carver*, p. 59.

⁴⁷ Buzbee and Simpson, "Raymond Carver," p. 38. Photographs of Duffy's can be found in Bob Adleman and Tess Gallagher, *Carver Country: The World of Raymond Carver* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), pp. 96, 99.

⁴⁸ Nessel, *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study*, p. 59.

⁴⁹ Raymond Carver, "Where I'm Calling From," *The New Yorker*, p. 45. The deleted lines are in parentheses.

⁵⁰ John Cheever, "The Five-Forty-Eight," *The Stories of John Cheever* (New York: Vintage, 2000), p. 238.

⁵¹ Cheever, "The Five-Forty-Eight," p. 239.

⁵² Cheever, "The Five-Forty-Eight," p. 240.

⁵³ Raymond Carver, "The Bridle," *The New Yorker*, p. 35.

⁵⁴ Carver, "The Bridle," *The New Yorker*, p. 34.

CHAPTER 5

POPULAR MINIMALISM: JAY MCINERNEY'S *BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY* AND SUSAN MINOT'S *MONKEYS*

Raymond Carver and Ernest Hemingway deeply influenced many of the young writers who achieved prominence in America during the 1980s. Spare, implicative fiction was near the height of its popularity, and it marked the reemergence of a tradition that had in some respects “fallen into desuetude.” In *Bright Lights, Big City*, Jay McInerney, who was at one time Carver’s student, uses efficient prose, allusion, and omission to explore some of the same themes Hemingway wrote about during the 1920s, but in the context of a tempestuous, narcissistic social scene unmatched in even *The Sun Also Rises*. Under the artificial glare of the New York City lights, McInerney’s nameless protagonist navigates an internal waste land, trying to find meaning in the wake of a failed marriage and unrewarding career. He is particularly noteworthy because he is a radical departure from what is considered to be the stock Minimalist figure: he is neither blue-collar nor unsophisticated. He is typical, however, because he withholds much about himself, although at the end of the novel he becomes more generous in his revelations.

Susan Minot’s *Monkeys* portrays a family that matches the emotional profile of McInerney’s narrator. The Vincents are intelligent and creative but are seldom able to directly address circumstances that cause them grief. Minot’s stories are stylistically and thematically similar to Hemingway’s in that they are highly implicative tales about children and young adults

coping with profound psychic wounds. Both *Bright Lights* and *Monkeys* are about individuals who have lost a parent and are early in the process of learning how to confront the resulting pain and disillusionment. The books are not maudlin or sentimental, however, because the understated narrative style in each matches well with the content. For example, suicide is a recurring subject in both, but it is not openly discussed or contemplated. The Vincents are devastated when mum dies, an event that happens “off stage” and may or may not have been accidental, but they seem to draw a renewed hope for the future once they are able to begin the mourning process. Similarly, McInerney’s protagonist is daunted by the weight of his memories. However, he ultimately chooses to reconnect with his past and end his wantonly self-destructive lifestyle.

The drug-filled, materialistic world found in McInerney’s fiction often seems governed by an unwritten but well-understood hedonistic code. Luke McGavock, in McInerney’s *The Good Life*, articulates it best when he ponders that many people in his rarified Manhattan universe believe the tenets “live to spend, dress to kill, shop and fuck your way to happiness.”¹ Virtually all of the characters in McInerney’s five novels wrestle with consumeristic “ideals,” which is perhaps why they often seem shallow and helpless. They know that there are more important things in life, but it is painful and unsettling to pursue them. Even worse, seeking them is not pleasurable. The central theme in McInerney’s fiction is that human experience is a constant battle to find a balance between self-control and excess. In his behavioral economy a person can casually snort a line of cocaine at a party, but damned is anyone who uses every day. Ironically, McInerney wrote moralistic works in an era when absolutes seemingly became irrelevant. Judging by the thematic consistency of his work, little has changed in his aesthetic during the last two and a half decades. *Bright Lights*, his first book, deals with many of the same issues examined in *The Good Life*: both pieces are about rediscovering moderation. *Bright Lights*

is markedly different from McInerney's other works, however, in that it was written using techniques central to American Literary Minimalism.

Minimalistic works often achieve thematic depth despite limited plots, and *Bright Lights* reflects this tendency. The nameless protagonist begins in a club in New York City, lonely and desperate. He is not sure what he is doing there or how his actions coincide with his vision of himself. As the story progresses, he talks about how he has been "sexually abandoned," his adopted euphemism for divorce, by his fashion model wife, Amanda. At times he grows inexplicably irritated at the mention of mothers and cancer. About half way through the novel, he is fired from his job as a fact-checker at a venerable magazine because he has not adequately corrected a hopelessly inaccurate article about French politics. His depression and drug use intensify. He learns that his former spouse is in town for a show, and he subsequently embarrasses himself by yelling at her as she strides down the catwalk. After succumbing to more instances of rejection and loss, the narrator eventually realizes that he must change the direction of his life if he wants to continue living.

Even though it is in many ways Minimalistic, McInerney did not write *Bright Lights* with the same degree of sparseness often found in the work of two of his greatest influences, Carver and Hemingway. While *Bright Lights* is efficient, it is not, for example, as lean as Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Günter Leypoldt's assertion that McInerney "favors a traditional neorealism with only minimalist realist leanings" carries substantial validity.² But the fact that the book is highly allusive, and important information is implied rather than directly stated, outweighs an occasional lack of economy. McInerney's use of parataxis in passages reminiscent of Impressionistic works concretizes his connection with his stylistic predecessors.

Much of the scholarship on *Bright Lights* is devoted to matters of technique and philosophical paradigm. Philip E. Simmons wrote that McInerney was “one of a generation of younger writers influenced by Carver” and that Minimalism is a “highly self-conscious response to the postmodern critique of representation, one which knowingly simulates a ‘return’ to plain style while remaining properly ironic about the discredited representational conventions on which plain style rests.”³ While McInerney does at times write spare, direct sentences, or in what Simmons refers to as “plain style,” his writing is most Minimalistic when it is paratactic and sensorial:

It’s ten-fifty when you get to Times Square. You come Up on Seventh Avenue
blinking. The sunlight is excessive. You grope for your shades. Down Forty-
second Street, through the meat district. Every day the same spiel from the same
old man: “Girls, girls, girls—check ‘em out, check ‘em out. Take a free look,
gentlemen. Check it out, check it out.” The words and rhythm never vary. Kinky
Karla, Naughty Lola, Sexsational Live Revue—girls, girls, girls. (13)

Using a technique often employed by Literary Impressionists, McInerney writes precise, declarative sentences that directly address sensory experience in a moment of time. Like Hamlin Garland’s prose-poem “The City,” McInerney’s passage begins by describing the position and intensity of the light. It is similarly fragmentary, transitioning from light to visual stimulation and then to sound while maintaining unity. The narrator offers the time of day as a means of establishing the temporal parameters of the moment, that it is a *vistazo*, as well as the position of the sun. The tone in this sequence suggests that the protagonist is suffering from sensory overload as he must “grobe for” his “shades” while he copes with the auditory monotony of a sex peddler. His movement is subtly implied, as he only says “down Forty-second street,” a

comment that implies a moral as well as physical direction. David Kaufmann included McInerney among “a number of highly successful young writers” whose work is marked by “the remarkable prevalence of paratactic constructions,” but his insight would be more complete if he had acknowledged that it establishes an important connection between Minimalism and the work of Literary Impressionists such as Garland and Stephen Crane.⁴

McInerney has defined Minimalism in two different ways. In an essay entitled “Writers of Wrong” published in 1989, he contended that

Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie are the literary godfather and godmother of the largest brood of young writers of the Eighties—the deadpan domestic realists. While both to some extent dodged the critical bullet, their influence has been much decried; millions of words have been fired at a straw man called minimalism. Carver’s career as a story writer and prose stylist had several distinct phases; only his second collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, can really be called minimalist—a conscious attempt to leave almost everything out. (Among the descendants, I would be tempted to call the admirable Amy Hempel a minimalist.) These writers did seem stripped down and laconic after the sprawling novels of the Sixties and early Seventies, their concerns narrowly domestic after the political and apocalyptic noises of immediate predecessors like Pynchon, Gaddis, Barth, and Vonnegut. They seemed artless and naïve to the metafictionalists who were all wrapped up in epistemology, the status of storytelling and fictional discourse, how to go on.⁵

Given McInerney’s affinity to Hemingway and Carver, this definition displays a surprising lack of self-awareness. McInerney almost completely dissociated his own work with that of his most

important influence and mentor, Carver, and is unclear whether he includes himself among “the deadpan domestic realists.”⁶ His preferred label suggests a specific type of content, that Carver, Hempel, and others wrote exclusively about various forms of domesticity, an assertion that does not bear scrutiny. He also repeated what is a standard explanation for why Minimalism first came into being: it was a response to the ornate, sprawling novels of “metafictionalists.” He is also slightly off in his statement that practitioners of the mode want to “leave almost everything out” because what is left out must be implied. Fortunately, he later adopted a more sophisticated view of the mode. His most recent definition of the style suggests a connection between Impressionism and Minimalism.

In his 2006 collection of essays *A Hedonist in the Cellar*, McInerney offered a definition of the mode that takes into account the influence of Impressionism; he described winemaker Greg Brewer as a “minimalist” due to the fact that he “wants to let the grapes and the vineyard express themselves without interference.” McInerney emphasized that he used the term as a means to connect a literary philosophy with oenology: “Whether consciously or unconsciously, the former professor [Brewer] seems to be echoing Flaubert when he says, ‘I want to be invisible, I want to get out of the way, I don’t want a stylistic stamp’.”⁷ This marks a shift for McInerney because he makes a distinct connection between non-intrusiveness and the tenets of Hemingway’s Iceberg Theory. The concept of self-effacement is important to American Minimalism because of its roots in Impressionism and Asian poetry. This formulation of the style applies to *Bright Lights*. McInerney’s narrator often describes his sensory experiences without elaborating on their moral or philosophical meaning. Zoltan Abádi-Nagy wrote that this type of narration is a common feature within the mode, although he did not make a connection with earlier traditions: “The minimalist agent . . . is consequential, anaesthetized, perhaps

inarticulate, partially presented, but one who observes, registers, and is reactive (rather than proactive) most of the time.”⁸ McInerney’s narrator lacks the self-awareness necessary to articulate the reasons for his loneliness. He tells his story in a series of concentrated, sensorial images.

In light of McInerney’s Minimalist tendencies, the compositional origins of *Bright Lights* is remarkably appropriate: it originated as a piece of “flash fiction.” In the introduction to *How It Ended: New and Collected Stories*, McInerney wrote that *Bright Lights* began as a single paragraph he composed “after a disastrous night on the town.”⁹ He spoke about that evening in more detail during an interview earlier in his career, saying that he was at a club called Berlin feeling as though he was “out of brain cells,” pondering whether he should ask a woman to dance when he began to wonder if he was “the kind of guy who would be in a place like this.”¹⁰ At the behest of editor George Plimpton, he extended the Impressionistic blurb into a short story that was eventually published in *The Paris Review* under the title “It’s Six A. M. Do You Know Where You Are?”¹¹ The tale relates two sequences of events that serve as the beginning and ending of *Bright Lights*; McInerney essentially divided “It’s Six A. M.” and created a new center. Michael Schumacher wrote that McInerney finished the first draft of the work “in six weeks.”¹² The final version is a sincere tale about a lost young man enamored with facades. McInerney shows remarkable control, particularly in terms of tone. While critics such as John Duka and Peter Bricklebank praised the novel for its deft portrayal of the zeitgeist, Michiko Kakutani failed to see anything profound in terms of plot and characterization.¹³

One of Kakutani’s criticisms was that *Bright Lights* is “autobiographical,” something that is not typically viewed as a weakness. The novel contains several biographical parallels, many of which have been addressed in various publications. McInerney’s first wife, Linda Rossiter, was a

model, and she left him. He worked as a fact-checker for *The New Yorker* for nine months until in 1981 he was told to either quit or be fired.¹⁴ Given the reference to a song by Talking Heads entitled “Crosseyed and Painless,” the second number on their seminal album *Remain in Light*, which was released in October of 1980, the novel is likely set in late 1980 or 1981.¹⁵ McInerney was a self-described roisterer who “had a taste for alcohol and ‘Bolivian Marching Powder’,” the latter term a euphemism for cocaine employed throughout his debut novel.¹⁶ McInerney said in an interview that his “mother died of cancer and the character in the book’s mother died of cancer,” but he goes on to state that he did not grieve in the same way. His use of biographical details is a conscious element of his aesthetic. He told Joyce Wadler of *The Washington Post* that he thought “most good fiction begins in autobiography and ends somewhere else all together.”¹⁷ The second-person point of view used in *Bright Lights* seems a good fit for a consideration of personal history because the narrative is essentially a lengthy internal monologue.

Narrated entirely in second-person and present tense, *Bright Lights* is a somewhat unusual novel. The protagonist never offers his name, addressing himself throughout as “you.” This choice of perspective is at times off-putting, but it is not entirely uncommon in Minimalistic stories and novels. Ernest Hemingway at times shifts into second-person, and Frederick Barthelme uses it in his short story “Shop Girls.” In a comprehensive study of the use of second-person in literature, Monika Fludernik mentioned Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Haunted Mind” as one of the earliest examples of an American work that uses the perspective exclusively.¹⁸ The practice is perhaps attributable to the movement’s kinship with literary Impressionism. Many of the most poignant sequences in *Bright Lights* are purely sensory, and the narrator’s use of second person suggests that he wants his audience to “share” his experiences.

The narrator is similar to his counterpart in Carver's "Cathedral" in that he wants to objectively communicate what is happening but he has difficulty articulating his thoughts and feelings. In emphasizing the immediacy of his experience, he closes off important information about his past. McInerney addresses this through implication. For example, he frequently uses non sequiturs as a means of hinting at tensions that fester below surface actions. Perhaps the best example of this occurs early in the plot when the narrator stops by a local deli for lunch. As the man behind the counter prepares a sandwich, he says, "and now for a little mustard—just how your mom used to make it." For reasons that are at this point unclear, the protagonist replies, "what do you know about it." Shortly after he receives his lunch, he offers a seemingly incomplete, random excuse for his behavior: "All of this, the dead meat on ice behind glass, everything, puts you off your meal" (27). While it is possible to discern the implications of the narrator's actions through a close reading, it is not until the penultimate chapter that protagonist reveals one of the reasons for his actions: his mother died of cancer. His reticence on this topic suggests that while he wants to confront himself, his disheveled emotions only allow him to do so incrementally. He is a complex character, in part demonstrated by the fact that critics have compared him to a variety of diverse figures in American literature.

Even though *Bright Lights* has been compared to J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, and Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, it is far more indebted to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, particularly in terms of its structure and characterization.¹⁹ Like Hemingway's protagonist Jake Barnes, the narrator in *Bright Lights* begins and ends his story in the same physical and emotional state. Both men are sexually dysfunctional, albeit for different reasons.²⁰ *Bright Lights* is symmetrical, beginning early on a Sunday morning in a club and then ending almost exactly

one week later, which is perhaps an extension of the fact that the novel is in essence the “middle” of “It’s Six A. M.” Near the physical center of book, the narrator first hears about Vicky, his friend Tad Allagash’s cousin. His brief time with her proves to be the catalyst for the changes he begins to undergo at the end. Like Jake, the protagonist of *Bright Lights* offers only a faint hint that through his experiences he has attained a more advanced state of self-awareness. Jake’s dismissal of Brett’s hypothetical state of true love parallels the narrator’s realization that he “will have to learn everything all over again” (182). Both men experience an epistemic shift, however slight, that adds depth to their respective tales.

As with *The Sun*, the critical reception for *Bright Lights* was an odd mix of praise, criticism, and misunderstanding. John Duka represented the book as a “funny” take on night clubs and fashion.²¹ An anonymous review in *Atlantic* mentioned two episodes, one involving a Cartier watch and another about a ferret, praising the latter as “satirical slapstick” but did not mention any of the more serious sequences that occur in the second half of the book.²² Terence Moran wrote in *New Republic* that it is an “accomplished and funny novel” that achieves profundity in the “quiet redemption of its main character.”²³ On the contrary, reviewers who wrote negative appraisals of *Bright Lights* often dismissed it as a work that lacks substance. Kakutani praised McInerney’s comedic sensibilities but concluded that “the book’s heavily autobiographical flavor and its refusal to plumb the shiny surfaces of its characters’ lives add up to a tale that’s peculiarly slight.”²⁴ Kakutani’s statement suggests that she appreciated the entertainment value of the novel but did not ultimately find any discussion of profound themes. Her criticism resulted from McInerney’s stylistic decisions; finding depth in *Bright Lights* requires multiple readings and extreme attention to detail. The humor is seldom light-hearted, often suggestive of the protagonist-narrator’s struggles with depression and loneliness. In a

review of McInerney's second novel, *Ransom*, David Remnick of the *Washington Post* savaged *Bright Lights* as a book about "such universal themes as the fact-checking department of *The New Yorker* and the downtown rock club scene."²⁵ Remnick's criticisms suggest that he, like Kakutani, did not fully explore the ramifications of seemingly minor details and omissions. Assessing the efficacy of McInerney's characterization is often a function of determining the importance of what is not said.

In the mid-1920s, Hemingway was criticized for similar reasons. In a review of *Men Without Women* published in 1927, Joseph Wood Krutch argued that Hemingway's characters are

the illiterate heroes of the prize-fight or the bull-ring, and sometimes they are the bankrupt intellectuals who wander disconsolately from bar to bar in the forlorn hope that a drink will be more refreshing somewhere else, but the two classes have this in common: they are all but inarticulate. The one has never learned to express itself, the other has grown tired of choosing words, and so both talk the lazy, monotonous, undifferentiated idiom which is the common denominator of the relaxed intellectual and the roughneck.²⁶

McInerney's characters would fall into the second of Krutch's categories, well-educated individuals who cannot overcome the inner pain that renders them "inarticulate." The pattern of behavior is the same: in McInerney's fiction, the club often replaces the bar. In his review of *The Sun*, Allen Tate wrote that Hemingway's focus on "physical object," or his reportorial manner of narration, was engineered at the expense of characterization: "Hemingway doesn't fill out his characters and let them stand for themselves; he isolates one or two chief traits which reduce them to caricature."²⁷ Tate and Kakutani are similar

in their criticisms because neither seemed to take into account the implicative nature of each text. The narrator's early reticence about the feelings that motivate his self-destructive behavior does generate a number of questions. The first two-thirds of the novel are often nothing more than a report on a series of sensations, many of which seem to have little meaning. While some of McInerney's characters, such as Clara Tillinghast and perhaps Tad Allagash, are decidedly two-dimensional, his protagonist has depth and humanity that can only be appreciated through a close reading.

Because Minimalist fiction often seems light on plot and characterization, scholars sometimes dismiss it as lacking a "message." This tendency has led critics to question whether McInerney's work is morally prescriptive or descriptive. He addressed the issue directly, saying in an interview that

students, I've been told, want to go to New York City and to live the life described in my novel. I've heard myself described as a Yuppie hero, as some kind of celebrant of a way of life and a set of values which I believe are actually held up for critical examination in my book. I don't feel I'm a Yuppie at all. Rather, I thought I was writing a book about someone coming to terms with failure, but it seems that the novel's been taken up by the people whose religion is success. They see *Bright Lights, Big City* as a guidebook to the world of fashion, the New York City's nightlife, to the pursuit of glamour. I was very shocked when magazines talked about the book as a wacky, funfilled [sic] romp through the fast lane.²⁸

In light of the rather moving and serious events of the last two chapters of the novel, it is interesting that some reviewers seized only on the humor. Despite what McInerney intended for

Bright Lights, some saw the book as evidence of a greater social crisis, that it was an argument in favor of drug use and excess. John W. Aldridge, a scholar whose comments suggest he gave McInerney's work only cursory consideration, condemned McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis as promulgators of cultural superficiality:

The novels of Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis, for example, are by any serious critical measure artistically empty works that are best-sellers largely because they depict a spiritually empty world that is attractive to readers who are themselves spiritually empty and so in reading them experience a faint twinge of self-recognition.²⁹

The fundamental problem with Aldridge's position is that he assumes these works are reserved for the tasteless and vacuous, and that matters of content should negate any serious interest in their stylistic attributes. Additionally, Ellis's work is quite different from McInerney's, more emotionless and reportorial, so it is not necessarily helpful to talk about them together.

Regardless, a close examination of *Bright Lights* reveals a story about a young man who is trying to emotionally come to terms with loneliness, the elusiveness of love, and his mother's death.

For the narrator in *Bright Lights*, his eventual epiphanic shift is in part a response to his need to come to terms with who he is. The novel is necessarily ironic because the narrator is in a state of willful blindness until the end. The depth of his state of denial is evident in the first sentence of the book: "You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning" (1). The instability of his character in part results from the tripartite division of his personality: he describes who he thinks he is, who his actions say he is, and who he wants to be. While talking to a "girl with the shaved head" and a "scar tattooed on her scalp," he concludes that his problem is that "for some reason you think you are going to meet the kind of

girl who is not the kind of girl who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning” (3).

The most suggestive passage in the first chapter, however, exhibits the depth of his disconnection with reality:

Your presence here is only a matter of conducting an experiment in limits, reminding yourself of what you aren't. You see yourself as the kind of guy who wakes up early on Sunday morning and steps out to cop the *Times* and croissants. Who might take a cue from the Arts and Leisure section and decide to check out an exhibition—costumes of the Hapsburg Court at the Met, say, or Japanese lacquerware of the Muromachi period at the Asia Society. (4)

Despite his pretensions to cultural sophistication, his discussions of his “true” self usually end with him spending time with a woman. In other words, his inflated image is a response to his loneliness. He wants to view himself as someone worthy of attention.

The scholarship dealing with *Bright Lights* as a story about “the self” tends to treat the protagonist as if he is “divided” into two parts rather than three. Gregor Wiebels-Balthaus proposed a postmodern version of the narrator, partitioning him into “the publicly presented self” and the “real self” and then concluding that McInerney is questioning whether “such a real, authentic self exists at all.”³⁰ While this is perhaps an interesting line of enquiry, it shifts focus away from the fact that *Bright Lights* is ultimately about coming to terms with personal failure rather than the cultivation of an “image.” McInerney said in an interview that the book “is essentially an interior monologue,” meaning that it is not a contemplation of selfhood but rather an ongoing, reactive report of what the main character is thinking. In other words, there is no truly “public” self against which to judge a “private” persona. When the narrator says “you,” he

is speaking only to himself and not using the term as a substitute for external listeners or an “everyman.”

Even though *Bright Lights* is in many ways focused on the protagonist’s internal state, allusions to external places and situations are vital to the development of theme. The richness of McInerney’s characterization is largely dependent upon his allusions to specific places. New York City brings with it a series of popular associations, the most important of which is that it is a place replete with opportunity. In the fifth chapter, entitled “Les Jeux Sont Faits,” a reference to a play by Jean-Paul Sartre of the same name, the narrator thinks back on when he first met his ex-wife, Amanda. She was living in a trailer park in Kansas City, unaware that she had the look of a model. She is drawn to the protagonist because she sees him only as a means to enter into a world she envisions as a glamorous escape. While engaged in an internal monologue about their time together, he remembers that

she seemed to think you came from Manhattan. Everyone in Kansas thought you came from New York City, whether you said Massachusetts, New England, or just East Coast. She asked about Fifth Avenue, The Carlyle, Studio 54.

Obviously, from her magazine reading she knew more about these places than you did. (70)

Throughout the novel, the narrator contemplates the nature of facades. New York City is presented as a real place but often in a purely sensorial manner.

McInerney’s decision to present Kansas City as a rural dead-end, the opposite of New York City, is an odd choice given that it is by no means a “backwater” town. In some of McInerney’s other novels, such as *Story of My Life*, *Brightness Falls*, and *The Good Life*, New York City is portrayed as the figurative capital of the Western world. His inclusion of Kansas

City makes sense, however, as an allusion to Hemingway. When the narrator talks about how he met his ex-wife, he mentions that he was a journalist in Kansas City at the time, the same job Hemingway held when he was a teenager.³¹ During one of the more embarrassing episodes in the novel, the protagonist learns that his friend Megan has a young son who lives with his father in northern Michigan (138). These examples seem to be token references to an author that McInerney respected, but Minimalistic fiction often includes allusions in order to emphasize the thematic focus of a work. McInerney's visual description of one club speaks to the leitmotifs of loneliness and isolation: "The glittering, curvilinear surfaces inside Odeon are reassuring. The place makes you feel reasonable at any hour, often against bad odds, with its good light and clean luncheonette-via-Cartier deco décor" (44). His references to bands such as Talking Heads place the story within a specific historical and spatial context, but it is this allusion to Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" that clarifies what it is that the narrator is after. He is out at six in the morning because he wants to experience a meaningful connection with others, particularly a woman. While the serenity of a Spanish café at 2 A. M. is the atmospheric opposite of a dance club, the men who patronize these types of places are after the same thing. McInerney's protagonist is different from Hemingway's Old Man, however. The former seeks not only to meet others but to find himself. Perhaps the most obvious allusion appears at the beginning of the book. The epigraph in the novel is a quotation from Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*:

"How did you go bankrupt?" Bill asked.

"Two ways," Mike said. "Gradually and then suddenly."

The concept of "bankruptcy" plays an important role in *Bright Lights*. The narrator's financial insolvency, which it is implied will grow worse after he loses his job, is closely related to his

moral bankruptcy. It is a term that, in the context of *Bright Lights*, speaks to the hazards of excess.

Cocaine is the most prominent vehicle for self-destructive behavior in *Bright Lights*, and it is an important object because it reflects the zeitgeist. McInerney omits much about the drug. The only earnest discussion of its effects does not occur until the end of the book. He treats it with both levity and seriousness, but the latter rarely seems to gain the notice of scholars. Characters in the novel are at times amusingly light-hearted about the drug, acting as if it is harmless. Tad Allagash narcissistically licks a mirror on Monday evening before going out in the hopes that its surface contains enough residue to give him a high, his logic being that “ ‘in this apartment the dust has better coke content than some of the shit we buy by the gram’ ” (43). While clearing out his personal effects after being fired, the narrator casually offers his co-worker Megan Avery some of the remnants floating around in his desk-drawer. Without hesitation, she snorts two lines (131). Even though “Bolivian marching powder” is ubiquitous in the novel, virtually none of the criticism written about *Bright Lights* seriously examines the actual effects of the narcotic, a glaring oversight given the importance it plays in character development.

In the 1980s, cocaine use was prevalent in the United States, especially among the wealthy elite. A report in *The Economist* stated that Americans spent \$60-70 million on the drug each year during that decade. Like owning an expensive watch or driving an exotic car, the drug “was surrounded by a halo of prestige and exclusivity.”³² Even though the protagonist in *Bright Lights* has not personally achieved astounding monetary success, he seeks to nurture a certain façade of wealth and sophistication. Cocaine is an affectation, and he uses it as a means to bolster his outer appearance in the same way he used his wife and his job:

Without getting too specific you imply that your job is extremely demanding and important. In the past you could often convince yourself as well as others of this, but your heart is no longer in it. You hate this posturing, even as you persist, as if it were important for these two strangers to admire you for all the wrong reasons. It's not much, this menial job in a venerable institution, but it's all you've got left.

(46)

The narrator displays a greater sense of self-awareness by saying that “his heart is no longer in it” when he lies as a means to inflate his image, but he continues to do it anyway, just as he continues to snort cocaine. His sense of resignation perhaps grows from a biographical parallel: McInerney was a part of the club-drug scene for many of the same reasons. He said in an interview that he, like his fictional counterpart, experienced a change in values: “I was young and that seemed to be a glamorous milieu—going to a club at midnight, being able to afford it, having enough cocaine to be able to stay up till 4 in the morning. I no longer think it's the height of human aspiration, but at the same time it seemed to be taken for granted among my friends as a great way to live.”³³ McInerney, like his protagonist, seems to have been emotionally divided, caught between a desire to act and look a certain way yet not fall into a state of superficiality and self-destructiveness.

More important than conveying an image of success is the narrator's desire to be “likable.” He says to himself that before his wife left him “you were very likable. That you had an attractive wife and a fairly interesting job seemed only your due. You were a good guy. You deserved some of the world's booty” (46-47). Given his desire to be and act a certain way, his choice of drug is ideal. Cocaine has been described as “expensive, energizing” and “esteem-boosting.”³⁴ In *The Candy Machine: How Cocaine Took Over the World*, Tom Feiling included

several accounts from people who use, or have used, the drug. Their stories often mirror that of the protagonist in *Bright Lights*; they took cocaine for the same reasons he does and experienced many of the same effects. “Gabrielle” said that the narcotic enhanced the depth of her interactions with acquaintances, maintaining that “ ‘some of the best conversations I’ve ever had have been between close friends when we’ve had some Charlie [cocaine]. You’re on it, but there isn’t that pressure to compete with other people for attention. You can have an earnest and honest chat about personal things’.” “Alan” emphasized the camaraderie users felt when under the influence, saying that cocaine induced “ ‘a tribal feeling, doing it with your friends, and all going off into a little story together. Coke amplifies your personality and makes your conversation that little bit more amusing and sparkly, if only for a short period of time’.”³⁵

Alan’s use of the phrase “a tribal feeling” is interesting. The narrator in *Bright Lights* uses similar language when describing the atmosphere at the first club he visits as having “a vaguely tribal flavor . . . pendulous jewelry, face paint, ceremonial headgear and hair styles” (2). The implication is that there is a uniformity to the way the club-goers act and look, a desire to conform as a means to feel part of a collective. The suggestion is that Alan, Gabrielle, and the narrator of *Bright Lights* share a common need to engage in meaningful exchanges with others to combat feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. In other words, they chose a drug that addressed what they perceived to be their primary weakness.

McInerney does not, however, imply that cocaine is a drug that can be used without consequence. He suggests that it only momentarily counters introversion, a quality that can lead to isolation and insularity. Even though the drug can lead to garrulousness, not all users experience any real sense of camaraderie. “Ricardo” disagreed with Alan and Gabrielle over whether cocaine actually leads to meaningful interaction, arguing that “ ‘one of the main effects

of coke is that everyone wants to talk and talk and talk. But after a point you realize that the words aren't working. You find yourself trying to describe your need to talk, but realizing that the words to do so barely exist. Words become useless, despite your fluency with them'.³⁶ A conversation early in the novel shows how cocaine offers verbal "fluency" but "words become useless." The narrator meets a girl in the club and they begin to dance. When the second song begins, she says she is tired, so he offers her some "blow." The immediate effect is a loss of inhibition: "A couple of spoons and she seems to like you just fine, and you are feeling very likable yourself" (7). As they head out of the ladies' room, they begin to converse:

"I love drugs," she says, as you march toward the bar.

"It's something we have in common," you say.

"Have you ever noticed how all the good words start with D? D and L."

You try to think about this. You're not quite sure what she's driving at.

The Bolivians are singing their marching song, but you can't make out the words.

"You know. Drugs. Delight. Decadence."

"Debauchery," you say, catching the tune now.

"Dexedrine."

"Delectable. Deranged. Debilitated."

"Delinquent."

"Delirium."

"And L," she says. "Lush and luscious."

"Languorous."

"Librium."

"Libidinous."

‘What’s that?’ she says.

“Horny.”

“Oh,” she says, casting a long, arching look over your shoulder. Her eyes glaze in a way that reminds you precisely of the closing of a sandblasted glass shower door. You can see that the game is over, although you’re not sure which rule you broke. Possibly she finds H words offensive. A purist (7-8).

This passage is a good example of McInerney’s wry sense of humor and preference for sparse yet implicative dialogue. It also illustrates his narrator’s mental state when high on cocaine. His participation in the woman’s word game indicates his desire to be charming and witty. On a more profound level, it demonstrates his need for companionship. He fancies himself to be a writer but he is unable to persuade through his use of words even though he has ingested something that he thought would help. He realizes that the word “game is over,” and that despite all the talk, nothing meaningful has occurred.

The casual playfulness of cocaine use is only somewhat offset by allusions to the high human cost of its production and distribution. The turmoil it caused in the United States and abroad, however, is a part of the iceberg. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the effects of cocaine extended well beyond the New York City club scene. Miami, for example, was in many ways a combat zone at the peak of the “drug wars”: in 1979, the city averaged a murder per day.³⁷ The narrator’s dark sense of humor about the origins of the narcotic is perhaps best on display when he randomly encounters Rich Vanier, a friend from his college days. Vanier says that he has just returned from South America after having “restructured” the finances of some unnamed “generals” so that they could “have a few more months of high living” (50). Because coca leaf production is greatest in remotes areas of countries such as Colombia, Peru, and

Bolivia, the leaders of populist militias are often among its primary beneficiaries.³⁸ Vanier's use of the phrase "high living" is a crass joke; he knows that the men he worked for are making it possible for their buyers to get "high." The narrator's response is a subtle indication that he is aware of the source of his cocaine: "I do a little South American business myself." When Vanier says that he had heard that the protagonist had married an actress, the response leads him to abscond: " 'activist. I married a beautiful activist. She was the illegitimate daughter of Che Guevara. A few months ago she went home to visit her mother and got herself arrested and tortured by a series of rich South American generals. She died in prison' " (50). This response shows an awareness of the atrocities that resulted from the drug trade, perhaps a sign of the narrator's feelings of self-loathing, but his knowledge does not lead him to stop. Not until the end does he begin to realize what has driven him to hedonistically self-medicate.

The final two chapters of *Bright Lights* are both serious and revelatory. The narrator acknowledges that the one year anniversary of his mother's death has arrived and he must complete the grieving process (178-79). Shortly before he comes to this realization, he thinks back to the frank conversation he had with his mother shortly before she died. She talks about her own use of cocaine, saying that she took it along with morphine "to ease the depression" (165). The implication is that her son has been taking it for the same reason, but this is somewhat ironic because if taken in high enough doses it can lead to "insomnia, apathy, anorexia, or depression."³⁹ In the final sequence of the novel, the narrator leaves a party early Sunday morning, shortly after weakly confronting his ex-wife, and reports that his nose begins to bleed. This is a physical indication of "chronic" use, signifying that if the narrator does not change he is going to kill himself.⁴⁰ The bloody nose was not included in "It's Six A. M.," suggesting that it

shows the extent of the narrator's problem and reinforces the religious imagery that permeates the final paragraphs of *Bright Lights*.

The final sequences of *Bright Lights* are rife with symbolism. As he wanders through New York City early Sunday morning, just as he does at the end of the first chapter, the protagonist notices blood on his fingers and shirt. Walking down Canal Street, a "bum" looks up at him and says, " 'God bless you and forgive your sins' " (180). The narrator then smells bread, reminding him of times when he was content with the important women in his life, his mother and Amanda. Finding the source of the aroma, he sees a man on a loading dock, perhaps preparing a bakery truck for deliveries. The narrator trades his well-worn Ray-Ban sunglasses for a bag of "hard rolls." He falls to his knees and gags as he eats, realizing that he will "have to go slowly" and that he "will have to learn everything all over again" (182). Blood, bread, an impromptu priest, kneeling: McInerney is not particularly subtle in his allusion, although virtually all of the critics that have analyzed the ending talk only about the bread, ignoring other important details.

McInerney distinctly alludes to the Eucharist, a rite that calls attention to his desire to belong. Ferguson somewhat derisively calls it a "final, choking communion of self-discovery."⁴¹ Remnick was more acutely critical in his analysis, calling the narrator's actions "a redemptive, pathetically banal, epiphany."⁴² Leypoldt offers a more nuanced, albeit conventional, reading: "the symbolism, of course, carries biblical pathos, as the symbol of yuppie values is traded in for the prime symbol of spiritual nourishment, the 'bread of life'." He goes on to conclude that the "bread signifies both spiritual purification and the completion of the grieving process."⁴³ The final scene is not exclusively about remembrance and absolution but the narrator's need to belong.

The narrator implies that he comes from a Roman Catholic background early on in *Bright Lights*, so his view has been shaped by the Church's tradition. While trying to determine whether to leave the club, he tells himself that he is

a republic of voices tonight. Unfortunately, that republic is Italy. All these voices waving their arms and screaming at one another. There's an *ex cathedra* riff coming down from the Vatican: *Repent. Your body is the temple of the Lord and you have defiled it.* It is, after all, Sunday morning, and as long as you have any brain cells left there will be a resonant patriarchal basso echoing down the marble vaults of your churchgoing childhood to remind that this is the Lord's Day (6).

His memory is stoked because he is in the midst of a minor ethical crisis. He is in no position to consider theological details in this moment, but the revelation of his background plays an important role in interpreting the ending. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Eucharist, along with Baptism and Confirmation, "completes Christian initiation."⁴⁴ It is one of seven sacraments performed as a means to "give expression to . . . faith and allegiance to God."⁴⁵ In other words, it is a means of outwardly expressing religious loyalty and affiliation.

Responding to a need he expresses earlier in the novel, the protagonist experiences an epiphany when he realizes his desire for community. During a midweek train ride, he notices a Hasidic Jew reading the Talmud and considers that "this man has a God and a History, a Community," things that he himself lacks. On fourteenth street he sees three Rastafarians and begins to feel that he is "the only man in the city without group affiliation" (57). He later has a similar experience when he wanders into an "anonymous Irish" bar and realizes that he knows nothing about the basketball game being shown on the television. He thinks that his "ignorance"

keeps him “locked out of the largest fraternity in the country” (85). His cocaine use and his friendship with Tad Allagash equally reflect his hope of being included in a “tribe.”

The speaker’s feelings of isolation, a lack of “affiliation,” are what motivate his desire to reform. The most common misconception about the ending is that it is catalyzed by the young man’s need to mourn over the death of his mother. This is only partially true. McInerney’s comments suggest that he achieved what he intended. He was asked in an interview to address whether the book was about self-destruction: “Given the number of readers who had turned *Bright Lights, Big City* into an etiquette book for the 1980s, are you glad you didn’t write about suicide?” Contradicting the interviewer’s presupposition, he said, “that’s funny, in a way, because I thought I had. Or at least that had gotten awfully close to the suicidal.”⁴⁶ The novel tracks the narrator’s process of coming to terms with his own mortality. The Eucharist is a ritual of remembrance, the symbolic consumption of someone believed to have died and then come back to life. Focusing heavily on the narrator’s psychosexual relationship with his mother, as Ferguson does, detracts from the fact that the protagonist is on a personal search to find meaning and purpose in his own life. His feelings about his mother reflect his feelings about himself. He wants to find a woman not as a means to fulfill a Freudian maternal need but because he wants to feel loved. His insecurities force him to decide to choose a path that will not end in an early death.

The protagonist’s contemplation of suicide is the most important omitted material. McInerney’s assertion that he had brought his narrator “awfully close to the suicidal” refocuses the novel on his narrator’s internal conflicts and moves him away from the dominance of his mother’s memory. In the final chapter, the protagonist comes to the realization that if he is to continue living, he must “start over” and reeducate himself to live life independent of the

influence of others. He cannot worry about the past, all of the women who have hurt him, so he must reinvent his values and motivations. Rather than properly mourn the death of his mother, he must mourn the death of the “self” that has failed to achieve monetary and social success. His capacity to begin again, however, is suspect. The allusion to the Eucharist suggests a need for faith, a hope in what he cannot see or prove. His “redemption” invites cynicism as it would not be any great surprise if he were in the same position again a week later. Imagining a rejuvenated, repaired narrator in a new job and a meaningful relationship with a woman may be, in the parlance of Jake Barnes, only a “pretty” thought.

The ending of *Bright Lights* is inconclusive, but the implication is that the narrator will begin the slow process of physical and emotional rehabilitation. The conclusion does not offer a concrete message or lesson, evidence that the book is not a how-to guide to living “the good life.” It is not surprising that *Bright Lights* has been misconstrued as a prescriptive tome for those whose “religion is success” because it reflects many of the tendencies of American Minimalism. The novel is a powerful yet subtle description of how a life of excess cannot erase feelings of failure and inadequacy. McInerney’s reportorial urban sequences, sparse dialogue, and allusiveness suggest that Carver and Hemingway were in many ways influential. McInerney’s allusions to the latter suggest a stylistic affinity, a desire to build upon themes of isolation and loneliness in a subtle, understated manner. While the surfaces of the settings and characters do indeed seem superficial, a close reading reveals extraordinary depth. McInerney’s protagonist is not a spiritually empty hedonist but a young man coping with the emotional realities of failure. His drug use is a means of compensation, a misguided attempt to transform himself into someone with a sense of belonging. He is in the end determined to change by going through the humbling process of re-imagining himself.

The need for reformation is also an important subject in Susan Minot's *Monkeys*. McInerney's protagonist parallels Sophie Vincent, one of the central figures in *Monkeys*, in many important ways: both struggle with the death of a mother and general feelings of detachment from their surviving parent and siblings. Minot's style favors Hemingway's to a greater degree than does McInerney's because she uses omission and implication more frequently. It is interesting, however, that in both pieces the mom passes away "off stage," suggesting that the event is so emotionally powerful that it cannot be directly described or confronted. In *Monkeys*, Minot does not examine a specific zeitgeist as her narratives span a much larger time frame than does McInerney's novel. Even though Minot's work is a collection of tales, it is similar to *Bright Lights* in that it achieves cohesion and uniformity despite its fragmentary structure.

Like the stories it precedes, the cover art on the first edition of Minot's *Monkeys* is richly implicative. Five children in costumes stand on a grassy hill above the ocean, smiling as they have their portrait made. In contrast to their colorful surroundings, each is depicted in black and white. The two smallest are dressed as jungle cats, and they are flanked on their left by a boy wearing a long coat over his outfit. Casting a somber tone over what it is largely a portrait of youth and innocence, two of the children depict skeletons. Through their presence, Minot, who created the artwork, subtly suggests that even within the idealized world of the young, death is a part of life. In juxtaposing vivaciousness and mortality, Minot visually suggests many of the themes and tensions she engages in her stories. Her fiction is reportorial, sensorial, and, as is her artwork, comprised of poignant individual images. Stylistically similar to the work of Hemingway and Carver, *Monkeys* stands as an important part of the American Minimalist tradition.

Early in her career, Minot favored Minimalistic style. Her first two works, *Monkeys* and *Lust*, are similar in technique. She wrote in this manner while in the creative writing program at Columbia University and at times it made her the focus of harsh criticism. In interviews with Kelli Pryor and Anne O'Malley, Minot discussed how one of her instructors "was rather impatient with the elliptical way I was writing and used me as an example of what not to do."⁴⁷ In 2002, she said in an interview that her aesthetic is best suited to the mode, and she recalled that she

was learning how to write short stories when I wrote *Monkeys*, learning how to polish and be as brief as possible, which is an aesthetic that I prefer. If you can say it in a shorter amount of time, that's better. At the time, Raymond Carver was writing, and people were writing short stories that were full of those Hemingway simple sentences, but also the subjects were about little moments.⁴⁸

Minot resisted being "tagged" as a Minimalist, but her acknowledgement of Carver and Hemingway as influences places her firmly within the tradition. Her comment about "little moments" is particularly telling because her stories often take on the fragmentary quality common in austere and Impressionistic works. The tales in *Monkeys* are often comprised of implicative, allusive images held together by basic plots.

Even though it was marketed as a novel, *Monkeys* it is best described as a short-story cycle.⁴⁹ It is composed of nine interrelated yet independent tales that follow a thirteen-year span in the life of the Vincent family.⁵⁰ Augustus "Gus" Paine Vincent, the father, is an emotionless, disengaged man who in many ways keeps his family on the perimeter of his world. The narrators in each tale reveal little about him, suggesting that he is inaccessible. Much is implied about him, however. For example, the casual disdain he displays for his spouse is in part based upon

religious and social differences. He comes from a wealthy Protestant family, she from a Roman Catholic background. Rosie Vincent, his wife, provides her children with their day-to-day care. She is the emotional center of the family, vivacious and loving. After her death, the siblings carry a profound emotional burden they are never able to completely abandon. While much of the book focuses on the parents, each tale also involves the Vincent children. The three eldest, Caitlin, Delilah, and Sophie, are in a particularly precarious time of life, forced to make the difficult transition from adolescence to young adulthood while coping with their father's alcoholism and Mum's demise.

Structurally, the cycle is linear in that it is constructed according to the maturation of the children. The kids are relatively young during the first four pieces; Caitlin is eleven in "Hiding" and fifteen in "Wildflowers." The fifth story, "Party Blues," is particularly important because it is in many ways transitional. Sophie, the figure in the book on whom the narrator tends to focus most, comes to the realization that her childhood is effectively over and that she must begin to confront adult matters such as love, betrayal, and loneliness. The final four stories overtly explore sensitive issues such as alcoholism and death, topics indirectly examined in the first half of the work. The childhood innocence that dominates the opening half of the cycle gives way to the issues and themes that accompany adulthood.

Like Hemingway and McInerney, Susan Minot incorporated many of her life experiences into *Monkeys*. While it would be irresponsible to read them as pure biography, the occurrences that inspired key moments in the stories form an important part of the iceberg. Much of the recent interest in *Monkeys* has grown from a continuing fascination with the artistically prolific Minot family. Susan has for many years remained silent on whether her cycle is based on familial events, but she said in an interview that she has not " 'figured out how to write about

things' ” that she does not “ ‘have some sort of contact with’.”⁵¹ In a letter to editor and long-time friend Ben Sonnenberg, Minot wrote that she was in part able to shape her memories into stories because of the temporal distance she had gained from her experiences: “In the family stories it was easy to dream—sort of—at any rate, it used a different pull, and they felt farther away, and so needed to be pulled in.”⁵² With the publication of Eliza Minot’s debut novel, *The Tiny One*, there has been a renewed interest in biographical parallels. The youngest Minot daughter’s book bears many similarities to *Monkeys*, although the father figure is not as emotionally distant as Augustus Paine Vincent. Susan’s brother George Minot said in a 2004 interview that Eliza and Susan’s works “ ‘were basically verbatim’,” a telling statement in many ways corroborated by Sam Minot’s memoir *The Strange Poverty of the Rich*.⁵³ In the preface, Sam expressed consternation over the fact that his brother and sisters “ hijacked” his “life and put” him “into their works of fiction.” In directly addressing Susan’s debut work, Sam maintains that *Monkeys* uses “different accounts from our childhood. Mum sometimes called us little ones ‘monkeys.’ She [Susan] kept the same first letter of our names for our fictitious characters.”⁵⁴ Despite Sam and George’s insistence that *Monkeys* is a near-factual account of their childhood, their respective views of past events are not always the same. The lack of overlap in each sibling’s account of what happened poses myriad problems for the biographer but adds depth and possibility to a consideration of what Susan Minot has omitted from *Monkeys*.

While some of the early reviewers made brief mention of the autobiographical undercurrents of *Monkeys*, many commented on Minot’s use of Minimalist techniques. An anonymous critic detected in Minot’s work “the voices of the masters—the descriptive economy of Hemingway, the imaged delicacy of Virginia Woolf,” authors whose work was in part shaped by Literary Impressionism.⁵⁵ Three reviewers addressed Minot’s use of Hemingway’s Iceberg

Principle. Jonathan Yardley maintained that she “writes in the minimalist style” and criticized her for attempting to “substitute” careful descriptions of objects for in-depth characterization, a common objection from those who do not fully comprehend the methods of the mode. Anne Tyler demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of Minot’s technique, praising her deft use of implication by omission.⁵⁶ Walter Bede placed *Monkeys* among a “family of current writing in which nothing really happens” but acknowledged that “much in these nine stories about the Vincent family is left vague or hidden below the surface, as major events occur offstage and characters change in the white spaces between chapters.”⁵⁷ The reviews expressed near unanimity about the directness of Minot’s prose: A. R. Gurney, Jr. praised Minot for her “fine economy”; Michiko Kakutani observed that “Ms. Minot has a gift for delineating her characters’ inner lives with economy and precision”; and Roxana Robinson and Thomas Hinde noted how Minot renders day-to-day experiences with an eye for minute detail.⁵⁸ Remarkably, *Monkeys* has elicited little response from the academic community and has not been assessed in the context of American Minimalism. James Nagel’s “Susan Minot’s *Monkeys* and the Cycle Paradigm” is the only serious scholarly examination of *Monkeys*. He offered a brief discussion of Minot’s technique, but the primary purpose of his essay is to examine matters of genre. Nagel explored many key allusions and explains how Minot’s leitmotifs help unify the work.

“Hiding,” the first story in *Monkeys*, introduces many of the book’s central themes and is in many ways a model Minimalist short story. As Nagel observed, the first sentence suggests that there are religious and familial divisions.⁵⁹ Sophie begins her narrative by informing her audience that “our father doesn’t go to church with us,” an immediate indication of parental disagreement.⁶⁰ The first two words are an ironic allusion to the Lord’s prayer; Mr. Vincent is in no way a dependable, “fatherly” force who responds to the needs of his children. Within the

family dynamic, he has none of his wife's grace and charisma. As Mum and her six children are "all downstairs in the hall at the same time, bumbling, getting ready to go" (1), dad is absent. He often stays away from his children when they are not physically static, suggesting that he is annoyed by noise and motion. While driving the car home after ice-skating, he turns the radio "off because there's enough racket already" (10). The children, bundled up in their winter coats are led from the house by Mum, who wears a funereal "black lace veil" (1). Gus stands motionless in the cold while Mum leads the processional, the children obediently "filing . . . out of the door" (2). Minot artfully balances the vibrancy of life with the inevitability of death throughout *Monkeys*, and the opening scene of "Hiding" serves as a prime example of how she accomplishes this through precision and subtlety.

The narrator, Sophie, describes a series of images that resonate throughout all of the tales. Her narration is unusual in that she at times speaks for herself but just as often represents all of the children, similar to the technique used by William Faulkner in "A Rose for Emily." For example, she explains the children's lack of vigor by reporting that "everyone's in a bad mood because we just woke up" (2). In accord with the narrators who follow her, Sophie is most closely attuned to the emotions and attitudes of the children. Her consistent physical proximity to her mother allows for a fuller picture of Rosie, but this intimacy is not shared by all of the narrators in *Monkeys*. As a result of her youth and innocence, Sophie does not always seem to grasp the meaning of what she is seeing and hearing. This limitation is, in part, why Dad remains a mystery. Sophie talks about what he does but she reveals little about his motives. It is telling that even though she at times speaks for the collective, her omniscience is confined to her peers. The information she shares about her parents demonstrates that she has a limited understanding of the adult world she observes and reports about.

Sophie communicates the division between her parents through contrasting images of heat and coldness. “Hiding” is set during winter. Mum is, literally and figuratively, an agent of warmth working against the various forms of frigidity that distress her home-life. As she dresses her children to face the elements, her husband, the chief representative of cold and detachment, stands “outside already on the other side of the French doors, waiting for us to go. You can tell it’s cold out there by his white breath blowing by his cheek in spurts” (2). While in church, a domain that exclusively belongs to Mum, the kids do not remove their coats (3). The priest, the only other adult male figure in “Hiding,” tellingly “leaves” Mum feeling “cold” (4). Even in summer, Dad is associated with winteriness as he “sprinkles white fertilizer on the lawn,” making it look as if it covered with “frost” (6). In a rare instance of leadership, Dad takes the family skating at a nearby outdoor pond. When he finishes his clean, powerful laps around the ice, “tears leak from the sides of his eyes and there’s a white smudge around his mouth like frostbite” (9). The opposite of Dad’s isolated power, Mum’s graceful figure-skating seems fiery and inviting: “Whirring around, she lowers into a crouch, ventures out one balanced leg, a twirling whirlpool, hot pink, rises again, spinning, into a blurred pillar or a tornado, her arms going above her head and her hands like the eye of a needle” (9-10). Dad, consistent in his indifference, takes no notice of Mum’s performance (10).

Sophie’s description of her father’s past demonstrates the allusiveness common in Minimalist fiction. Sophie mentions that Dad “played hockey in college and was so good his name is on a plaque that’s right as you walk into the Harvard rink” (9). This information carries an important biographical parallel with considerable bearing on how Gus is characterized. Susan Minot’s father, George R. Minot II, was an accomplished hockey player at Harvard University from 1946 to 1950. The plaque that Sophie mentions likely honored winners of the John Tudor

Memorial Cup, an annual award given to “the most valuable member of the Harvard hockey team.” George Minot received the Cup for his performance during 1949-50 season. It was not simply to commemorate his talent but to reward him for exhibiting “sportsmanship, leadership, and team cooperation.” More importantly, it was given to him because he possessed “the vague quality which John Tudor called ‘the old come through in the pinch’.”⁶¹ While Sophie’s mention of the plaque seems a relatively minor detail, it is highly implicative. Her father was honored with an award for attributes that he consistently fails to demonstrate within his home. He is in no way a “valuable” member. He does not lead or cooperate, and throughout *Monkeys* he shows that when life becomes tangled and difficult, he is unreliable. Sophie’s observation is thus bitterly ironic; his qualities as a “good” hockey player have not led to success in domestic roles.

Mr. Vincent’s unreliability fuels the emotional climax in “Hiding.” After several failed attempts to earn her husband’s attention, Mum and the children hide in an upstairs linen closet while Dad is away at the store with the hope that he will come looking for them once he realizes they are missing. They wait in anticipation, and it is telling that they are unsure of what Dad will do. Minot creates a sense of immediacy through direct sensory description:

The motor dies and the car shuts off. We hear the door crack, then clip shut.

Footsteps bang up the echoing porch, loud, toe-hard and scuffing. The glass panes rattle when the door opens, resounding the empty hall, and then the door slams in the dead quiet, reverberating through the whole side of the house. Someone in the closet squeaks like a hamster. Downstairs there isn’t a sound. (19)

By focusing on a brief moment in time, Minot accentuates the depth of the family’s feelings. They want to know that they are appreciated and safe, that their father-husband cares about them. True to his character, however, he does nothing. Through subtle imagery, Minot implies that Mr.

Vincent's coldness causes feelings of emotional confinement. Sophie observes how "the light from downstairs shines up through the railing and casts shadows on the wall—bars of light and dark like a fence." The play of shadow and light also changes the appearance of their clothing: "Standing in it we have stripes all over us" (21). Home has become a figurative prison for the kids, and the overall sense is that nothing is going to change. Speaking again for the collective, Sophie reports that she and her siblings listen for their parents "with the football drone in the background, even though this isn't anything new—we always see this, holding out your arms and seeing the stripes" (21). Echoing the religious connotations of the "our father" in the first sentence, extended arms and "stripes" allude to divine pain and persecution. Even though these images border on the sentimental, Minot's stark prose maintains a remarkable level of tonal control. The overwhelming message of "Hiding" is that the Vincent children suffer for reasons they do not fully comprehend.

The theme of emotional coldness and stagnation continues in "Thanksgiving Day," a tale that reveals some of the reasons for the divisions within the Vincent family. Because of a lack of familial warmth, the Thanksgiving tradition has lost its vibrancy, although it is unclear whether it ever had any. Life for the Vincents seems to have become a series of customary gestures. The children realize that they are to greet their grandfather, Pa, upon arrival because "every year it was the same" (23). The entire clan has gathered, aunts, uncles, and cousins, to dine together. The scene is strikingly funereal, however, because everything within the elder Vincent's home seems to be in a state of decay. Sophie, for example, ponders the dead rabbit used to make her cousin Bit's muff. The children venture into the attic to see a dead lion shot by Ma's father, the fur on its head almost gone from "being touched, or from being old" (31). The narrator juxtaposes the image of Ma as a young woman before marriage, "holding a plume of roses at her

waist, her chin to the side, her dark eyes and dark hair swept up,” with a conversation about a neighbor who “died after she cut her finger on a splinter from a Christmas-tree ornament” (28). The speaker seems to suggest that the photos and memories are fading, that the glory of the family name is no longer what it was.

The objects in the home are essentially miniature monuments to a fading era of accomplishment and prosperity that once came easy to the Vincent family. As Nagel explained, many of the details Minot includes reveal that the family is, or was, wealthy and well-educated. Pa was a “dollar-a-year man,” academically trained at a New England prep school and then Harvard University, and his brother was a “famous doctor who discovered the cure for a disease” (32).⁶² The latter was likely based on Susan Minot’s great-uncle George R. Minot, the man her father was named for, who won the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1934 for finding a cure for pernicious anemia.⁶³ Despite all the material objects that serve as reminders of American nobility, conversation among those present at dinner tends to shift towards destruction and decay. Pa’s health is fading, and his mind is not what it once was. He does not remember his children skating on his frozen-over “sunken garden” (32-33), and his wife must cover for him when it is alluded that he was responsible for a fire that destroyed the “piazza” on their old home in Cassett Harbor (35). When Ma attempts to calm him, he asks, “why don’t you go shoot yourself?” (37). The implication is that Pa’s disillusionment stems from the onset of senility, a condition that does not allow him to maintain the mythical level of competence he exhibited in his youth.

The deterioration implied in “Thanksgiving Day” carries over into “Allowance,” a tale that suggests that Dad is having monetary problems. He is not a “dollar-a-year man” like Pa: he must be paid for his work in order to provide for wife and kids. To some degree, a similar

financial downturn occurred in the Minot family. Despite their Brahmin ancestry and the appearance of familial wealth, the Minots experienced something of a “reversal of fortune.” Without irony or self-awareness, George Minot said in an interview that “the money ran out on us . . . we didn’t go to Gstaad. We went to Bermuda. It was tight.”⁶⁴ George’s comment speaks to the central tension in “Allowance”: the Vincents are worried about their financial state but do not act accordingly. This is a story about excess, the inevitable conflicts that arise when perception and reality are grossly misaligned. When things are “tight,” the price of a trip to both Gstaad and Bermuda are prohibitive. The depth of Dad’s financial problems lead to his increased drinking and desire for solitude.

Consistent with Minimalistic technique, Minot does not offer explicit detail about the family’s money shortage. Much is communicated through brief, implicative images. “Allowance” begins in the middle. While “trapped” in their cottage at a resort in Bermuda because of persistent rain, the kids understandably grow restless. They are loud and full of energy, so it is no surprise that Dad is hidden away in his room. Mum’s eventual emergence is greeted by silence, further proof of her importance to the children. Her appearance immediately suggests that something is wrong; the narrator reports that she “came out in a bathrobe—something she’d never be wearing at home” (44). She is “distracted,” also unusual, and is unable to exhibit the easy confidence she displays in “Hiding”: “ ‘It’s Dad,’ Mum said. ‘He—’ Her eyes were shiny with visions. . . . ‘He thinks—’ But she couldn’t go on and was overtaken by little sobs and jumpy breaths. . . . It’s okay. It’s just things at the bank, and he thinks . . .” (45). Even though the children do not understand the full extent of the problem, they again show that they are closely attuned to their mother’s emotional state. Caitlin asks if they should go home. Mom’s halts and starts, her inability to articulate what is at issue, and her incomplete state of dress

poignantly illustrate the depth of her anguish and helplessness. As is often the case in *Monkeys*, the sense is that Dad should be the one to deal with these kinds of issues, but he is conspicuously hidden away.

One of the most memorable scenes in the cycle illustrates the depth of Dad's detachment and emotional immaturity. Because he has been drinking from his requisite "gallon of bourbon" for much of the afternoon (46), he is drunk at the start of the family dinner. The kids are "careful not to look straight at him," perhaps out of respect for Mum. As the children skeptically ponder their green pea soup, Mum anachronistically alludes to the 1971 "Mikey likes it!" advertisement for Life cereal when she declares, " 'Look . . . Dad likes it'," letting them know that "it was okay to look at Dad now" (49).⁶⁵ Because he is acting immaturely, his face "one inch from the bowl," Mum calls "yoo-hoo" in order to rouse him from his stupor. She is trying to negotiate a difficult situation. The suggestion is that she wants to somehow maintain her husband's dignity in the eyes of their children and that his poor behavior is not serious enough to elicit fear or a lack of confidence. This is nowhere more apparent than when in the moments after Dad has poured his ice water over his head, "Mum dipped her fingers into it as if it were holy water, but instead of crossing herself, absentmindedly, the way she did when arriving late for church, she purposefully dabbed the water around her neck like perfume" (51). Dad at times calls Rose "Mum," and it indicates of the fact that he needs her to care for him not as a wife but often as a maternal figure.

The absurdity of Dad's behavior at dinner carries over into a third image, set at the ocean. While his kids play, Gus yelling at him to gain his attention much the way Mum does at dinner, Dad sits "behind the girls in a rickety chair he'd found on the beach, wearing sneakers and socks" (53). Similar to the suggestive power of the empty rocker at the end of "Thanksgiving Day," which implies that Pa will soon pass away, the "rickety" state of Dad's chair reflects the

state of his relationship with his family. His shoes indicate that he is again to be treated with distance, that he does not intend to play. He provides money for ice cream when called upon and during a trip to a fort commands the kids to obey their mother, but he seems more mascot than active participant. In the final action of the story, Gus steals his father's wallet and then tries to hide his misdeed. While Nagel argues that Gus's thievery "suggests that the inherent pathology in the relationship between the parents is having its effect on the children,"⁶⁶ it also seems a calculated attempt by Gus to gain his father's attention. On the beach Gus yells "watch me!" to no effect, so he makes a weak attempt at painting himself as a hero by "finding" the lost item in the bushes, a ploy that if successful would garner fatherly appreciation. Because it is apparent that Dad gives the kids money whenever they want something, it is unlikely that Gus is motivated by greed. Dad says nothing when his billfold is recovered, taking time only to confirm whether anything is missing, and Gus begins to look panicked because everyone "knew what he'd done" (57). Gus's extreme measures do not even elicit him the negative attention of a punishment, and the implication is that Dad's emotional frigidity has become insurmountable.

In "Wildflowers," it is Mum who goes to extreme measures in an attempt to gain her husband's attention. In the sixteen months since the trip to Bermuda described in "Allowance," it is implied that Mum has begun an affair with a weapons manufacturing magnate named Wilbur Kittredge. The third-person narrator is closely aligned with Mum's consciousness. The events of the story take place in North Eden, Maine, an island community that swells in population during the summer months. The girls have all reached their teenage years and are increasingly aware of the problems between their parents. They also notice a newfound sexual and emotional vibrancy in Mum, and Caitlin and Sophie understand the reason for it. Early in the story, the narrator observes that

Mum had brought wildflowers—loosestrife and buttercups and queen anne’s lace. There was no space for a garden at the Vincents’, with the dock in front and Main Street just up the steps—the vegetable garden was in another place entirely—so Mum gathered flowers up island. She found fields everywhere shimmering down to the sea, flowers scattered and random, not boxed inside walls. On her bedside table she kept a small vase, always fresh.

Sophie remarks that Mum is “feeling her oats,” reflective of the elder woman’s newfound sense of purpose. Both girls know, however, that it is because Mum has been invigorated by Kittredge’s attentions. Sophie says that “guess-who must be racing today” (60), a reference to Kittredge and the boat races, and her statement is an indication that the young women are no longer oblivious to the intricacies of love and betrayal. Because of the depth of their allegiance, they do not express anger towards Mum, suggesting that any emotional ties they may have once felt with their father have been severed.

Understandably, the Minots have not commented publicly on whether their father and mother had marital problems of the sort alluded to in “Wildflowers,” but they have spoken extensively about their summers. Their vacation house, first mentioned in “Thanksgiving Day,” was in a town called North Haven, Maine. Sam Minot described the place in detail:

Our house on the island was right on the water, literally. A wharf house remodeled since its earliest days of catering to the big schooners, the cargo ships of the era. The house was a long rectangular, cedar shingled, two storied triplex that balanced on wooden pilings and granite blocks. At high tide the ocean comes entirely under the house, making it feel like you’re on a boat. My grandparents, my dad’s parents, purchased this place back in the late 1930’s for

they had learned about the island through friends. We called them Ma and Pa and they lived at one end of the house with their live-in Irish cook, Sheila. The walls of their interior were water stained pine paneling with half round covering each spacing groove of the vertical boards. Nice old Chinese carved reliefs made by an eccentric white man a century earlier, were mounted as inlays on these walls, giving the rooms an Asian touch. . . . The opposite end of the house, a four bedroom unit, was where we stayed in as children. The in between [sic] area, a three bedroom unit, was known as the middle house. All these units were under the same roof, a unique antique house that easily accommodated the likes of a large family like ours.⁶⁷

Sam's account suggests that the house was extremely important to the family, but it was also highly partitioned. It is in many ways reflective of the emotional state of the Vincent family: everyone could be in the same building yet still maintain their distance from one another. Sam had fond recollections of the time he spent there as an adolescent and talked about the nearby structure that served as the island yacht club.

Mum is in her element when she is at the club, greeting her friends, catching up, doing the kinds of things that Dad avoids. Her spirit is not one of division but of a desire to create and maintain a sense of community. The summer people gather at the afternoon races "clustered together; they'd know each other a long time" (60-61). While on its surface "Wildflowers" seems to be about Mum's affair and eventual disillusionment, it is in actuality about the nature of motherhood. Minot depicts the bond between mother and child as far more substantial than that between lovers: it is a relationship with meaning and sustainability. This does not mean,

however, that Mum is not conflicted about her roles. She is relatively young at thirty-nine years old, and she still desires passion.

Minot omits many of the details of Mum's relationship with Kittredge. The narrator of "Wildflowers" reveals that they "went on rides" in his carriages when Dad was back home in Marshport. Her commitment to him seems primarily physical: her politics are decidedly left-wing and anti-war while he is wealthy because he "made bombs" (69). The relationship is similar to her marriage in that it mirrors the religious division between her and Dad. Kittredge is for Mum a mythical idealization, someone who allows her to forget the realities that weigh on her. The narrator reveals much about Mum's state of mind during the "silver fox" sequence. The speaker contrasts the mundane duties of motherhood with the allure of a man with a "grayish-white spot on the back of dark head," a figure later identified as Kittredge. As Mum stands near him, her "eyes were lit with brightness" (62). The narrator juxtaposes this image with that of a silver fox Mum claims to have seen while on Boxed Island, an event that her husband dismisses as false because he does not believe that the animal exists.⁶⁸ Foxes in some contexts possess mythical qualities; in *The Golden Bough*, James George Frazer talks about how they were sometimes burned during European summer festivals. Some believed foxes were particularly dangerous because witches were known to shift into their shape.⁶⁹ The narrator describes Mum as if she is returning home after a night taking part in a pagan rite of spring, saying that she "came flying out of the cricket darkness, her nightgown luminous, a fiery look in her eye. She was panting" (62). Mum's reaction to Kittredge carries base connotations as well. The term "fox" is slang for someone who is attractive, and Mum's giddiness around him is proof that she finds the silver-haired Kittredge alluring. She is "thrilled" with him just as she was when "the

silver fox streaked across” her path on Boxed Island (63). Unfortunately for her, her experiences with both man and beast prove ephemeral.

Like foxes, carriages take on particular imagistic importance within “Wildflowers”: they represent both pleasure and intense pain. Mum’s carriage rides with Kittredge are for sexual liaisons, and it is later implied that he used them for this purpose with other women as well. The narrator mentions that during a late-night ride home Caitlin and Sophie spot Kittredge’s carriage outfitted with “red lamps,” objects commonly associated with prostitution, and he is sitting next to “a woman with a hat on” (69). It is unclear who this woman is, though the girls seem to think it is their mother. Mum later spots her lover in a carriage with an unidentified blonde woman, and she knows that her relationship with him is effectively over.

Minot broadens the imagistic relevance of carriages by suggesting that for Mum they are a source of maternal suffering. The implicit idea is that for Mum sex is not simply for pleasure, as it is for Kittredge, but also for procreation. It is not an inconsequential act. The narrator reveals that Mum gave birth to a daughter named Frances in 1961, nine years before the events described in “Wildflowers,” and that the newborn died in a “baby carriage” (66). While there is little if anything redemptive about the Kittredge episode, Mum gives birth to another child in the end, a daughter named Miranda, and her paternity is ambiguous. The “thrill” she feels while being near Kittredge early in the tale gives way to the maternal satisfaction of feeding her newborn: “There is nothing so thrilling as this. Nothing” (73). She affirms that the failings of her romantic dealings are far outweighed by the joy she derives from motherhood.

While Rose revels in her contentment as a mother, her teenaged daughters are learning to cope with a complex adult world. In “Party Blues,” Sophie ponders her own sexual awakening and learns about betrayal first-hand. The third-person narration focuses on Sophie, and the plot

closely mirrors that of “Wildflowers.” The girls are throwing a “huge” party in the absence of their parents, who are away on vacation in Bermuda with the two youngest kids, Chicky and Minnie. Sophie spends much of her time looking for her boyfriend, Duer, who is suspiciously missing. The narrator either knows him intimately or is essentially relaying Sophie’s thoughts:

Duer wasn’t about to walk in. He was more likely giving his undivided attention to a dazed fifteen-year-old developed beyond her years. Duer with his own lazy eyes, looking the girls up and down, rubbing his chest under his shirt. He had Sophie’s heart entire and complete (78).

Sophie faces many of the same problems her mother struggles with in the previous story. The over-developed fifteen year-old parallels the young blonde with whom Kittredge betrays Mum. The difference, however, is that Sophie has likely been tolerating Duer’s behavior for a long time. Mum returns to Dad and the children in the wake of her affair with Kittredge, but Sophie stays with Duer because she does not have a similar alternative. She has given her heart to someone unequally committed, whose drives are purely physical, but her infatuation dictates that she stay with him even though he is destructive emotionally.

The depth of Sophie’s understandable discontentment with love and life manifests itself in the contemplation of suicide. The narrator demonstrates a profound sensitivity to Sophie, saying that

she’d taken it hard—the discovery of her faults. Death was never far from her mind. One evening, Mum asked her to promise she wouldn’t commit suicide until she was eighteen. “I think you’ll outgrow it by then,” she explained, casually doing her needlepoint in front of the TV (81).

Mum's seemingly nonchalant attitude about suicide suggests that she feels it is normal part of growing up, something that perhaps she has herself pondered during difficult stretches of her life. As Nagel observed, a "suicide motif . . . surfaces in virtually every story."⁷⁰ The overall suggestion, however, is that Sophie will eventually learn to cope with the vicissitudes of daily experience once she achieves a true sense of independence.

Minot's allusion to Ludwig Bemelmans's *Madeline* stories in the final paragraph of "Party Blues" is particularly important because it indirectly suggests that Sophie has realized that her childhood is over. Minot conflates the original *Madeline* with *Madeline and the Gypsies*, published about twenty years apart.⁷¹ Both plots follow the experiences of a young orphan named Madeline. Her adventures are often set among the monuments of Paris, and Bemelmans's tales are in many ways a celebration of the city itself. Like Minot, he was both an author and painter. In *Madeline*, the title character needs an emergency appendectomy, and it is Miss Clavel's seemingly telepathic knowledge of her girls that leads her to awake in the night and cry out that "something is not right!" For Sophie, this exclamation reflects her own ineffability. Like so many characters in Minimalist works, she is unable to articulate what she feels and thus begin the process of coming to terms with her problems. The idea of disappearance grows from Sophie's recollection of *Madeline and the Gypsies*. When a day at the Gypsy Carnival is disrupted by a violent storm, Madeline and Pepito, the son of the Spanish ambassador, are forgotten as they ride the Ferris wheel during a storm. They are rescued, drugged, and kidnapped by a "Gypsy Mama," who despite her dubious actions is presented as a benign and protective figure. They travel throughout France and learn various circus skills until they are returned to the orphanage. This story likely resonates with the eighteen-year-old Sophie because she too played circus when she was young: "They used to put on circuses next door with the Birches.

She'd liked that." Reflective of her precarious state as a teenager coping with a fickle lover, she used to pretend to be a "trapeze artist" (77). The narrator's harrowing final statement, that "one of the little girls is gone" (89), is an indication that Sophie now realizes that her youthful innocence has faded and that she can no longer rely upon her mother to resolve her problems for her. In a figurative sense, Sophie, like Madeline, has been orphaned.

Sophie's sense of abandonment is exacerbated by her father's unreliability, an attribute glaringly on display in "The Navigator." Because of its serious tone and direct treatment of Dad's escalating problem with alcohol, "The Navigator" was later included in an anthology of short stories entitled *The Invisible Enemy: Alcoholism & the Modern Short Story*.⁷² Set on North Eden, Maine in August of 1977, all of the children have at least entered their teenage years, the lone exception being six-year-old Miranda. They are preparing dinner and talking about their parents. Mum has somehow convinced Dad to spend an evening playing games at the Irvings', and the kids laugh when they determine that the alternative was a Sunday clambake at the Kittredges'. Delilah reflexively calls her father a "poor guy," a label replete with meaning. While they do not seem to begrudge their mother's affair with Kittredge, they share a sense of pity about Dad. Because they are no longer children, they now see him as a pathetic figure. Sophie offers only a hollow show of support, replying that "he can handle it" (92-93). As the narrative progresses, it becomes starkly evident that Dad can "handle" little.

Alcohol is a ubiquitous object in "The Navigator," and it is invested with deep and divisive emotions. Ma, who is now without Pa, enters the plot already drunk and "wobbling" after an afternoon spent drinking Sherry in her living room. The evening begins well for Dad but ends poorly. Caitlin and Sophie encourage their father when he finally appears wearing a yellow blazer, complimenting him on his "snappy" appearance (96-97). The next time they see him, he

is so drunk he needs help from his “Mum” in order to get back in the house. The third-person narrator mentions that Dad calls his wife “Rosie” as an allusion to “the schoolteacher in *The African Queen* who dumps out all of Humphrey Bogart’s gin in order to get them down the river” (97-98). Mum abstains from drinking, and the implication is that she “never drank” because of the abiding sense of responsibility she feels towards her “monkeys.”⁷³ Minot communicates much through the use of imagistic correlative. As Ma vacantly smiles at her surroundings, Gus stands at the window and says “ ‘foggy’.” As everyone busily moves around the kitchen, he concludes that “ ‘everything’s disappearing’ ” (97). His ominous observation suggests that the family is caught in a “fog” of denial, a general lack of awareness, that mirrors the physical cloudiness of a person under the influence. A lack of vision, or a refusal to acknowledge the situation for what it is, ultimately leads to the disappearance of interfamilial faith.

The “fog” that pervades this early sequence is snapped by an equally poignant image at the end of the tale. After Dad returns from the Irvings’ drunk, the family confronts him about his problem and encourages him to seek help. He seems receptive. The family decides to take the boat out to a favorite picnic spot for lunch, and Dad competently guides them through rocky waters without the aid of a spotter.⁷⁴ Once there, however, the peaceful outing is disrupted by a shotgun-like “*crack*” (108). Minot describes the scene masterfully:

Some heads jerked toward Dad; some looked down. Above them, Dad was facing the root screen, his back to the family. Mum didn’t move, lying on the life jacket, eyes hidden behind her sunglasses. Sophie hugged her shins and bit her knee. Gus’s neck was twisted into a tortured position; he glared at Dad’s back.

Dad turned around. He gazed with an innocent expression out over the snaking water. If aware of the eyes upon him, Dad did not betray it, observing the scenery with contentment; nothing more normal than for him to be standing in the shade at a family picnic holding a can of beer. He twisted the ring from its opening and, squinting at a far-off view, stooped to lap up the nipple of foam at the top of the can (108).

The power and meaning of the moment are communicated through imagery alone. Consistent with Minimalist technique, the narrator does not comment on the significance of the scene: the passage is purely reportorial. The closest she comes to indicating an emotion is in the description of young Gus's neck, which is "twisted in a tortured position." Dad's nonchalant "contentment," his overwhelming sense of normality, sharply contrasts with the family's unspoken feelings of betrayal. The final sentence of "The Navigator," possibly an allusion to the last sentence of Carver's "Vitamins," suggests that Dad's problem is, in the eyes of his family, insurmountable.⁷⁵ The narrator talks about how the kids would throw rocks into the thorofare and "the darkness would swallow up a stone and they'd wait, but no sound would come. It seemed then as if the stone had gone into some further darkness, entered some other dimension where things went on falling and falling" (108). This well-crafted ending successfully synthesizes the concept of disappearance, introduced with Gus's comments about the fog, with the family's seemingly inexorable decay.

The Vincent's metaphorical fall continues in "Accident," a tale about the aftermath of Mum's death. The title refers to a car accident involving Sherman, but it also alludes to an event that, even though omitted, represents the emotional apogee of the cycle: Mum's death. Minimalistic plots often focus on characters in the midst of unspoken crises, the causes of which

are subtly implied, and Nagel maintained that “it is indicative of Minot’s minimalist methodology that the most important event in the book is never directly portrayed and is revealed only through partial memories obliquely described.”⁷⁶ The children are understandably forlorn, and Sherman’s mishap occurs because both his drinking and anger towards his father have intensified. Sherman confronts Dad moments after wrecking his car and asks him why he does not “act like a faddah” (125). Consistent with his character, Dad weakly retreats. Because “Accident” is part of a collection of interrelated stories, much can be discerned about the possible reasons Mum drove her car into a train.

In the decades since the original publication of “Accident” in *The New Yorker*, the emergence of new biographical information has complicated the interpretation of Mum’s actions.⁷⁷ Based solely on the text of *Monkeys*, it is most likely, although not absolutely certain, that Mum has taken her own life. Even though she seems relatively content with Dad in the wake of her failed affair with Kittredge, it is possible that she suffers from a lingering depression. Dad’s drinking, and the considerable embarrassment it continues to cause, has not abated with time. Nagel maintained that Mum has killed herself, and his argument is compelling given the references made to suicide in earlier stories such as “Hiding,” “Thanksgiving Day,” and “Party Blues.”⁷⁸ The actual death of Helen Minot, however, was likely an accident. Although Sam Minot, like his fictional counterpart Sherman, also had “certain theories about the accident,” Susan did not agree with him, and her rejection of his version of events makes it unlikely that she would construct a fictional scenario that suggests she accepted it. Although Sam was away from home when his mother died, he contended that

our mother was killed in a bizarre car accident, colliding in her car head on into a train that ran nearby our house in Manchester. She was forty-eight years old

when it happened on that sunny, January Monday morning. It was deemed that the lights weren't working at the railroad tracks crossing due to an icy storm over the weekend. In any case, the engineer stated in the newspaper that he saw her coming down the hill and that he had sounded the train's horn. It was a direct head to head [sic] collision and her little Ford Fiesta was demolished, causing her instant death. The priest who blessed her body said that she had a content smile on her face; [sic] unlike he had ever seen on a corpse.⁷⁹

Sam essentially dismissed the facts of the case: the roads were treacherous and the signage was dysfunctional. Many details that he included in his memoir suggest that he felt a latent anger towards his father, and his "theories" seem to be a mechanism for casting blame.⁸⁰ "Accident" is about Sherman's frustration with Dad, and their confrontation near the end seems both pointless and cathartic. Sam is alone in his interpretation because

his siblings, for the most part, become exasperated when he raises this chain of events. Their mother, they say, drove her car into an oncoming train entirely by accident; a winter storm had broken the warning signals at the crossing. The bells never rang; the red lights failed to flash. "Sam is—whatever," Susan Minot told me recently, in her terse way. "He's got his own thing. And people in the family kind of do this. They sort of act like they have a little inside information, somehow."⁸¹

Mum's accident also occurs in January, so it is plausible that the roads would have been dangerous at the time of her collision (130). Despite his seeming confidence in his position, Sam eventually retreated:

Many things were under the surface and all her children, except for Eliza, were out of the house. Her job as homemaker and mother of seven was pretty much over and the future prospects of living alone with an alcoholic must have depressed her. I don't know what happened. It could have been, and probably was, a freak coincidence for her Catholic upbringing surely shunned any thoughts of suicide since our lives aren't our own in belonging, but that of God's.⁸²

Sam demonstrated a deep level of empathy and insight when talking about his mother. Because Rose is, like Helen, a devout Catholic, it is unlikely that she would commit a mortal sin. Regardless, the iceberg is remarkably complex. While biographical evidence supports the argument that Mum's death is in fact an accident, Susan Minot's choice of a suicide leitmotif provides considerable evidence to the contrary. The only certainty at the end of "Accident" is that the Vincent siblings must now negotiate the difficulties of adulthood in the absence of the one parent they could depend upon for guidance and love.

In "Wedlock," the intense sadness the Vincents feel manifests itself in mundane objects and events. The original version of the story is entitled "The Silver Box," a more appropriate name because it refers to an important physical item that appears in the tale rather than a diffuse concept.⁸³ "Wedlock" is set during Christmas, the first the family has celebrated since Rose's death. The plot is quite weak; little happens other than conversation. Dad drifts in and out of the story, at one point appearing "puffy-eyed" and "awful" (131). Because the family has not completed the mourning process, they feel an intense absence: "The house was filled with missing things" (130). Material items carry intense memories and emotions they are unprepared to confront. When looking for the decorations, they find some of Mum's clothes and "a shoebox of postcards from Mr. Kittredge" (131). Dad leaves the house to buy himself some shaving

cream, something he used to get in his stocking. Dad may have also visited Pat Meyer, the woman he later marries, a prospect that Sherman finds upsetting.

The implication of the ending sequence is that the Vincent will only survive Mum's death if they maintain their familial bond. The daughters, with the exception of Minnie, talk about their own romantic travails. Caitlin and Delilah have visited with their boyfriends, admitting that they will eventually marry. In talking about their own relationships, they begin to empathize with their father, to appreciate the loneliness he must feel. Even though he has failed them repeatedly because of his drinking, they do not hold him to any standard of conduct. As the girls chat, a drunken Dad appears at the door not wearing "pajamas" (137). They tell him to return to bed and Sophie whispers "he had a lot tonight" (138). While Dad's coping mechanism is self-destructive, it seems that the siblings will to some degree be able to rely upon each other for support. The girls share a closeness, however, not matched by Gus, Sherman, and Chicky. "Wedlock" is essentially a story about the power of love.

The closeness expressed in "Wedlock" is concretized in the final tale in *Monkeys*, "Thorofare." Eighteen months after Mum's death, Delilah and Sophie visit the undertaker to collect Mum's ashes. The third-person narrator shares some of the details of Mum's accident, perhaps indicating a new openness within the family. While the narrator is not closely allied to any of the siblings, the suggestion is that they have begun the process of gaining closure. Dad has remarried, and it has in part given him the courage and resolve to say goodbye.

While it would be inaccurate to say that *Monkeys* ends happily, the final story includes subtle themes of redemption and restoration. Dad's marriage to Pat has set into motion a new outlook within the Vincent home. About one-third of the way into the plot, Sophie moves into the living room and notices that Pat has been cleaning and rearranging. The curtains have been

sent out and a rug has been removed, “revealing a polished wooden floor Sophie had never seen before.” The narrator reveals that while Sophie was given the unfair burden of filling Mum’s role “things had deteriorated,” but Pat has “brought painters in for the upstairs bedrooms, and Mr. Parsons had been over to look at the rot on the front porch” (147). Throughout the cycle, homes reflect the family’s collective emotional state. The implication is that Pat has played a role in literally and figuratively halting the Vincents’ descent. One result is that Dad’s attitude towards the children improves, and it is significant that he does not drink in “Thorofare.” When Delilah requests that they spread some of Mum’s ashes in Marshport, Dad rebukes her. He relents, however, and determines that the best place for the ceremony is his garden, a space that he has protected and considered his own throughout the book (150).

The final sequence of events poignantly illustrates both the family’s sadness over Mum’s death as well as the potential for rejuvenation. The Vincents gather in Maine in order to fulfill Mum’s desire to have her ashes spread in the thorofare near their summer home. After much bustle and preparation, a scene in some ways reminiscent of the opening of “Hiding,” Dad and the children embark. In a moving ceremony, each family member throws a handful of Mum’s remains into the sea.⁸⁴ On the way home, Caitlin asks her father, “do you think it will get nice?” In an uncommon show of optimism, he replies, “I know it will” (158). By throwing Mum’s “bones” into the ocean, the Vincents feel that restoration may be possible. Minot subtly alludes to imagery used in Ezekiel 37:1-14, the passage in which God tells the prophet to speak over dry bones in order to bring them back to life. In doing so, Ezekiel restores hope to Israel. While the ending does not imply that the Vincent family’s troubles are fully resolved, the suggestion is that they have earned a new sense of freedom. Less clear is whether they will know what to do with it.

The Minot children have revisited the events of the past in both fiction and non-fictional accounts, suggesting that they are still attempting to come to terms with their adolescence. Much has been revealed about the family in the past decade, and these facts provide essential insight into what Minot has implied but omitted from *Monkeys*. While biographical parallels do not necessarily provide absolute interpretive certainty, they often generate a deeper appreciation for the profundity of what may seem on the surface to be nothing more than a collection of well-crafted but mundane vignettes. Additionally, these new revelations form the basis of a fresh appreciation of Minot's formidable ability as a stylist. Even though her tales primarily explore domestic content, her precise sentences and eye for detail are in many ways equal to Hemingway's finest work. The simplicity of Minot's prose enhances the sensorial impact of her stories. Given the emotional magnitude of the events that inform *Monkeys*, it is remarkable how Minot avoids the pitfalls of sentimentality.

McInerney and Minot's fiction represents some of the finest, most emotionally profound Minimalist work written during the 1980s. Both authors successfully match content and style, and the subtlety of their prose coincides with the complexities of their personae. *Monkeys* and *Bright Lights, Big City* are about deeply affecting topics, dealing with themes that in the hands of lesser writers would seem maudlin and trite. McInerney uses comic relief and clever, succinct dialogue to relieve psychological tension. Minot deftly creates characters who consistently show warmth and humanity despite living in a cold, uncaring world. Minot and McInerney are engaged writers with much to say, but they are also craftsmen who imply the profound needs of their characters by illustrating what life is like in the absence of love and a defined sense of purpose.

Notes

¹ Jay McInerney, *The Good Life* (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 165.

² Günter Leypoldt, *Casual Silences: The Poetics of Minimal Realism from Raymond Carver and the New Yorker School to Bret Easton Ellis* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001), p. 218. Leypoldt preferred the term “minimal realism” to Minimalism but was essentially describing the same mode.

³ Philip E. Simmons, *Deep Surfaces: Mass Culture & History in Postmodern American Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p. 129.

⁴ David Kaufmann, “Yuppie Postmodernism,” *Arizona Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1991): 101.

⁵ Jay McInerney, “The Writers of Wrong,” *Esquire* 112 (July, 1989): 114.

⁶ For McInerney’s perspective on his relationship with Carver, see Jay McInerney, “Raymond Carver, Mentor,” *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver* (Santa Barbara: Capra, 1993), pp. 119-26.

⁷ Jay McInerney, *A Hedonist in the Cellar* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), p. 114.

⁸ Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, “The Narratorial Function in Minimalist Fiction,” *Neohelicon* 27, no. 2 (2000): 240-41.

⁹ Jay McInerney, *How It Ended: New and Collected Stories* (New York: Knopf, 2009), p. x.

¹⁰ Joyce Wadler, “A Turn in the ‘Bright Lights’,” *The Washington Post* (Dec. 12, 1984): F13.

¹¹ Jay McInerney, "It's Six A. M. Do You Know Where You Are?" *The Paris Review* 86 (Winter, 1982): 181-88. This story also provides the title of the first chapter of *Bright Lights, Big City*.

¹² Michael Schumacher, *Reasons to Believe: New Voices in American Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 96.

¹³ Peter Bricklebank, Review of *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney, *Library Journal* 109, no. 16 (1984): 1863, John Duka, "Notes on Fashion," *New York Times* (Sept. 14, 1984), B9, and Michiko Kakutani, "Books of the Times," *New York Times* (Oct. 30, 1984): C17.

¹⁴ Schumacher, *Reasons to Believe*, p. 89.

¹⁵ The protagonist received a "framed needlepoint sampler" from his colleague Yasu Wade with a quotation from the song: "Facts all come with points of view / Facts don't do what I want them to." McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (New York: Vintage, 1984), p. 23. All subsequent references are from this edition. Information on *Remain in Light* can be found in Anonymous, "Remain in Light – 1980," The Name of This Site is Talking Heads, <<http://www.talking-heads.nl/index.php/discography/81-remain-in-light>> Accessed February 15, 2010, 10:36 P. M.

¹⁶ Schumacher, *Reasons to Believe*, p. 89.

¹⁷ Wadler, "A Turn in the 'Bright Lights'," F13.

¹⁸ Monika Fludernik, "Second Person Fiction: Narrative You as Addressee and/or Protagonist," *AAA, Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 18, no. 2 (1993): 218.

¹⁹ Kevin L. Ferguson, *Engaging the Eighties: Ethics, Objects, Periods*. Ph. D. diss. The City University of New York, 2007, p. 99. McInerney's third novel, *Story of My Life*, is a recontextualization of *The Catcher in the Rye*. The narrator-protagonist, Alison Poole, constantly

berates people she believes are deceptive. Like Holden Caulfield, she narrates her tale from a medical facility.

²⁰ Despite the claims of John W. Aldridge and Ferguson to the contrary, it is important that the protagonist in *Bright Lights, Big City* never has sexual intercourse during the novel. Ferguson stated that the narrator “treats himself to lots of cocaine, nightclubs, and bootless one-night stands” when in fact he experiences none of the latter. He does, however, experience one failed attempt with a girl who is implied to be underage (154-55). Ferguson, *Engaging the Eighties*, p. 113.

²¹ Duka, “Notes on Fashion,” B9.

²² Anonymous, rev. of *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney, *Atlantic* 254, no. 6 (1984): 145.

²³ Terence Moran, “Brief Review,” *New Republic* 191, no. 22 (1984): 42.

²⁴ Kakutani, “Books of the Times,” C17.

²⁵ David Remnick, “Jay McInerney’s High Kicks in Tokyo,” *Washington Post* (Aug. 25, 1985): 5.

²⁶ Joseph Wood Krutch, “The End of Art,” *The Nation* (Nov. 16, 1927): 548.

²⁷ Allen Tate, “Hard-Boiled,” *Critical Essays on Ernest Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises*, ed. James Nagel (New York: G. K. Hall, 1995), p. 43.

²⁸ Sanford Pinsker, “Soft Lights, Academic Talk: A Conversation with Jay McInerney.” *The Literary Review* 30, no. 1 (1986): 108.

²⁹ John W. Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction* (New York: Scribner’s, 1992), p. 9.

³⁰ Gregor Wiebels-Balthaus, *The Self in Trouble: Young Adults in the Urban Consumer Society of the 1980s in Janowitz, Ellis, and McInerney*. Ph. D. diss., Ruhr Universität Bochum, 2005, p. 248.

³¹ See Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Collier, 1969), pp. 31-37.

³² Quoted in Belén Boville, *The Cocaine War In Context: Drugs and Politics*, trans. Lorena Terando (New York: Algora, 2004), p. 49.

³³ Wadler, "A Turn," p. F13.

³⁴ Tom Feiling, *The Candy Machine: How Cocaine Took Over the World* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 2.

³⁵ Feiling, *The Candy Machine*, pp. 222-23.

³⁶ Feiling, *The Candy Machine*, pp. 227-28.

³⁷ Feiling, *The Candy Machine*, p. 39.

³⁸ See Chapter 7 of Feiling's *The Candy Machine*.

³⁹ Bernard Elser, Hollace S. Mittleman, Richard E. Mittleman, "Cocaine," *The American Journal of Nursing* 84 (Sep., 1984): 1092.

⁴⁰ Elser, Mittleman, Mittleman, "Cocaine," pp. 1092, 1094.

⁴¹ Ferguson, *Engaging the Eighties*, p. 123.

⁴² Remnick, "Jay McInerney's High Kicks," p. 5.

⁴³ Leypoldt, *Casual Silences*, p. 228.

⁴⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition* (New York: Doubelday, 1997), p. 368.

⁴⁵ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1993), p. 210.

⁴⁶ Sanford Pinsker, "Soft Lights, Academic Talk," 108.

⁴⁷ Anne O'Malley, "An Interview with Susan Minot," *Poets & Writers Magazine* 15, no. 3 (1987): 13, Kelli Pryor, "The Story of Her Life," *New York* 22, no. 23 (June 12, 1989): 52-55.

⁴⁸ Dave Wiech, "Author Interviews: Back in Bed with Susan Minot," Powells.com. <<http://www.powells.com/authors/minot.html>>. Accessed May 20, 2009, 2:09 AM.

⁴⁹ Scholarship on the short-story cycle has been fairly extensive. The best discussion of *Monkeys* as a cycle is James Nagel's "Susan Minot's *Monkeys* and the Cycle Paradigm," in *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), pp. 80-103.

⁵⁰ Seven of the stories were published prior to the appearance of *Monkeys*; "Wildflowers" and "Party Blues" are the only original components of the book.

⁵¹ Pryor, "The Story of Her Life," p. 54.

⁵² Susan Minot to Ben Sonnenberg, January 15, 1987, The Ben Sonnenberg Papers, Box 7, Folder 6, "1987-2000," Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁵³ Dinitia Smith, "The Minots, A Literary Clan Whose Stories Divide Them," *New York Times* (May 27, 2004): E5.

⁵⁴ Sam Minot, *The Strange Poverty of the Rich* (Lincoln: iUniverse, 2004), pp. ix, 39. Sam's claim about first letters is only partially accurate: Caitlin for Carrie, Sophie for Susan, Delilah for Dinah, Gus for George, Sherman for Sam, and Chicky for Chris. Eliza's fictional counterpart is named Miranda, and Helen's is Rose.

⁵⁵ Anonymous, rev. of *Monkeys* by Susan Minot, *Jim Kobak's Kirkus Reviews* 54 (March 1, 1986): 332.

⁵⁶ Anne Tyler, "The Art of Omission," *New Republic* (June 23, 1986): 34, 36.

⁵⁷ Walter Bede, "Pall in the Family," *Village Voice* (August 5, 1986): 46.

⁵⁸ A. R. Gurney, Jr., "Men, Women and Children First," *New York Times Book Review* (April 27, 1986): 27, Michiko Kakutani, "It's Your Choice, Lilian: The Cad or the Cluck," rev. of *Folly* by Susan Minot, *New York Times* (Oct. 20, 1992): 17, Roxana Robinson, "Remains of the Day," rev. of *Evening* by Susan Minot, *New York Times Book Review* (Oct. 11, 1998): 12, Thomas Hinde, "Bursts of Lucidity," *Books and Bookmen* (September 1986): 37.

⁵⁹ Nagel, "Susan Minot's *Monkeys*," pp. 84-85.

⁶⁰ Susan Minot, *Monkeys* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1986), p. 1. All subsequent references are from this edition.

⁶¹ Anonymous, "Team Awards," Official Website of Harvard University Athletics, <http://www.gocrimson.com/sports/mice/history/teamawards>. Accessed Feb. 14, 2010, 12:23 A. M..

⁶² Nagel, "Susan Minot's *Monkeys*," p. 87.

⁶³ Deborah Solomon, "A Family History in Rewrite," *New York Times* (July 9, 2006): 32.

⁶⁴ Smith, "The Minots," p. 5.

⁶⁵ Tom Shales, "The Grand Old Man of TV Tots and Other Little Rascals," *The Washington Post* (July 8, 1977): B9. The ad starred a three year-old named John Gilchirst.

⁶⁶ Nagel, "Susan Minot's *Monkeys*," p.

⁶⁷ Sam Minot, *The Strange Poverty*, pp. 32-33.

⁶⁸ “Boxed Island” is based on Burnt Island, off the coast of North Haven, Maine. Sam Minot talked about it frequently in his memoir:

My destination was Burnt Island, an island owned by our family. It had been purchased by our grandparents, purportedly for just hundreds of dollars back after the Great Depression, during a time when owning a spruce covered island seemed ludicrous. On my way there, while skimming across the waves on the Boston Whaler, I pondered how it was that I got to come to this place, solely because I was born into this rich family.

He expressed anger when he learned that his father had donated it to the city of North Haven.

Sam Minot, *The Strange Poverty*, p. 49.

⁶⁹ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), pp. 760, 762.

⁷⁰ Nagel, “Susan Minot’s *Monkeys*,” p. 95.

⁷¹ Ludwig Bemelmans, *Madeline* (New York: Puffin Books, 1998), Bemelmans, *Madeline and the Gypsies* (New York: Puffin Books, 2000). I am indebted to Nagel for identifying these titles. See Nagel, “Susan Minot’s *Monkeys*,” p. 94.

⁷² Susan Minot, “The Navigator,” *The Invisible Enemy: Alcoholism & the Modern Short Story*, ed. Miriam Dow and Jennifer Regan (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1989), pp. 3-14.

⁷³ This scene includes two important biographical parallels. In his memoir, Sam Minot explained that Helen Minot was referred to as “Carrie,” a nickname her husband gave her as an allusion to the prohibitionist Carrie Nation:

We, from alcoholic families, have a tendency to be drinkers. My mom didn’t even drink; consequently, my dad nicknamed her “Carrie” after the prohibitionist, Carry Nation. The results were that she adopted this name, dropping her former:

Helen. Mom had expressed to me that both her parents were drinkers and she felt that if she drank alcohol that she would be an alcoholic as well. This was one galvanizing facts [sic] that I re-learned in rehab and I wasn't bashful about letting my father know this.

Sam described many confrontations with his father, George, that involved alcohol. Sam Minot, *The Strange Poverty*, pp. 36-37,

⁷⁴ Biographical anecdotes suggest that George R. Minot was protective of his sea-going vessels. In an e-mail to Ben Sonnenberg dated August 9, 1996, Susan Minot wrote that "Dad is going to take us in the big motorboat which only he is allowed to drive to Burnt Island for a picnic." The Ben Sonnenberg Papers, Box 7, Folder 6, "1987-2000," Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁷⁵ In Carver's "Vitamins," the protagonist returns home from a night of drinking and experiences a fittingly pathetic sequence of events: "I couldn't take any more tonight. 'Go back to sleep, honey. I'm looking for something,' I said. I knocked some stuff out of the medicine chest. Things rolled into the sink. 'Where's the aspirin?' I said. I knocked down some more things. I didn't care. Things kept falling" (109). Raymond Carver, "Vitamins," *Cathedral* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

⁷⁶ Nagel, "Susan Minot's *Monkeys*," p. 98.

⁷⁷ Susan Minot, "Accident," *The New Yorker* (Nov. 7, 1983): pp. 50-54.

⁷⁸ See Nagel, "Susan Minot's *Monkeys*," p. 98.

⁷⁹ Sam Minot, *The Strange Poverty*, p. 61.

⁸⁰ George Minot's *The Blue Bowl* implies that Sam's anger towards his father was considerable. The Sam figure, Simon Curtis, is a painter and nomad. Early in the novel, he stalks

his father, a cold and secretive alcoholic, while surreptitiously sleeping at the family home in Manchester-by-the-Sea, MA. One evening, someone strikes Dad in the head with a blue bowl and kills him. Simon is put on trial, convicted, and then has his sentence overturned on a technicality. The narrator, Simon's older brother, admits in the end that he is the killer.

⁸¹ Solomon, "A Family History in Rewrite," p. 33.

⁸² Sam Minot, *The Strange Poverty*, p. 62.

⁸³ Susan Minot, "The Silver Box," *Grand Street* 5 (Winter, 1986): 26-33.

⁸⁴ George Minot includes a version of the ash-scattering ceremony in *The Blue Bowl*.

Like the father in *Monkeys*, Mr. Curtis neglects Mum's ashes for a considerable period of time:

Simon, tossing his handful when it was his turn, got a little bit of it in his eye, when a little puff of dust of her like ghosted up back in the wind, fast, in his face, as the other little pieces all fell into the water, right in his face, and he like *pp*-spat it out, and it watered for a while, in there. Mum's last physical contact with him, not the sweetest touch ever, while Dad after his handful, after Timmy did his, dumped the brown paper bag, lined inside with plastic, upside down, to tap and shake out the last bits and little smoke. Then he dipped it in the water, to get her last dust, and poured it out. From here Burnt Island was right there, and from Burnt Island you could see this spot, past the seal rocks in the Little Thorofare you had to go around that went under at high tide, like seals themselves that lounged there in the sun at low tide, and Dad a long time ago said he was going to put a plaque with Mum's name and dates on the rocks to the left of the dock coming up the ramp where you could see the spot, her grave, but of course he never did it, just like it took a couple of years for him to go get the ashes from the

cremator in Salem, where they used to burn witches at the stake, so they could finally spread them here where she wanted.

Sam Minot, *The Blue Bowl*, p. 119.

CHAPTER 6

THE EXPANSION OF THE MINIMALIST TRADITION: SANDRA CISNEROS'S *CARAMELO* AND CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* signify the “state of the art” in American Minimalism. Both works represent a return to the Imagist roots of the tradition; each is prose-poetic and contains passages that suggest the influence of Amy Lowell's Polyphonic Prose. Structurally fragmentary, both are comprised of a series of disconnected yet interwoven sensorial moments. McCarthy does not divide *The Road* into chapters, but it is noteworthy that he wrote each episode separately and gave each part its own title. *Caramelo* is similar in that many of the chapters are relatively brief and stand alone as independent short stories.

Cisneros and McCarthy maintain the compression and efficiency that characterize austere works but use language in engaging and innovative ways, achieving a lyricism uncommon in the tendency. Both authors incorporate poetic devices into their prose. McCarthy, for example, uses formal metres and alliteration in some of his passages. Cisneros is an accomplished poet, and it is remarkable how well she is able to meld disparate genres by focusing on visceral experiences and brief moments. Despite an indebtedness to the origins of the mode, both authors offer an original contribution to the tradition. *Caramelo* and *The Road* demonstrate the heterogeneity of the style; the post-apocalyptic darkness of McCarthy's world acutely contrasts with the vivacity

of Cisneros's Reyes family. Each novel is about an extended physical and mental journey, which is uncommon within the category. Most importantly, each book maintains the central tendencies of American Minimalism while expanding the linguistic parameters of the tradition.

Cisneros's *Caramelo* is one of the most stylistically daring works of fiction published in the last decade. It is an unconventional novel, and it is best-described as a lengthy collection of vignettes and stories that achieves unity through thematic continuity and inter-connected imagery. The chapters are compact, well-crafted, and non-chronological. Although it is not directed at adolescents, it is similar to Cisneros's most famous work, *The House on Mango Street*, because it requires a heightened level of interpretive insight. Even though it at times seems incomplete, a work that lacks a distinct design, the book achieves profound richness. It is a fragmentary, impressionistic collection of memories and historically-based reminiscences shaped by American and South-American Minimalist traditions.

Cisneros incorporates poetic devices and techniques into her prose, reflective of the fact that she is an accomplished poet. She uses dense imagery and precise language in the many vignettes that comprise the novel, and her style is at times reminiscent of the work of Amy Lowell and the Literary Impressionists. Her devotion to craft in part explains why it took her nine years to finish the book.¹ In an interview with Renee H. Shea, Cisneros said that "I write in such a way that every syllable matters; maybe that's why the book took me so long. But I don't know how else to write; my unit has always been the syllable. Sometimes Dennis [Mathis, her fiction editor] tells me to take bigger strokes—but in essence I'm still a miniaturist."² In calling herself a "miniaturist," she may have been attempting to avoid the "Minimalist tag."³ Regardless, she values precision and directness, saying that "I write about very complex things in ways that are simple and poetic."⁴ While there is nothing epic about the book in a classical sense, it

achieves a remarkable level of emotional forcefulness despite its prose-poetic efficiency. Aspersive names such as “domestic deadpan” and “catatonic realism” would be difficult to apply.

Cisneros said that *Caramelo* began in earnest around 1993 as a story she told to her friends about a family trip to Acapulco, a tale she thought would be fairly simple to include in her collection *Woman Hollering Creek*. During the writing process, however, the piece expanded and she came to the realization that it was likely going to be a novel.⁵ Considering that *Caramelo* is over 440 pages long, it may seem absurd for her to refer to herself as a “miniaturist.” In the American Minimalist tradition, however, the overall size of a work is irrelevant. The chapters in *Caramelo* are finely wrought stories that combine to form a heartfelt, entertaining work of prose.

Structurally, *Caramelo* is in many ways unusual. All eighty-seven chapters, many of which are brief, stand alone as individual stories, although some, such as “Echando Palabras,” would seem incomplete if left on their own because important information is omitted only to be revealed later. This type of deferral, a technique also used by Jay McInerney in *Bright Lights, Big City*, is akin to the “big reveal” commonly found in detective fiction and melodrama. Cisneros published some chapters as short stories, although when placing them within *Caramelo* she had to add material in order to establish continuity.⁶ All of the pieces that comprise the work feature the same characters, and the fact that Celaya “Lala” Reyes narrates all of the tales unifies a seemingly disjointed, fragmented plot.

Caramelo is divided into three, non-chronological sections woven together by common themes, characters, and images. Part One, “Recuerdo de Acapulco,” describes a Reyes family road trip from Chicago to Mexico City that transpires when Lala is four or five years old. Her exact age is omitted; she at one point says to her grandfather Narciso that she does not “go to

school yet.”⁷ Cisneros uses many of the episodes in this portion to establish the central characteristics of individual family members. For example Soledad, also known as Awful Grandmother, fulfills the expectations of her nickname and makes life prickly for everyone except her beloved son Inocencio. Lala introduces her many uncles, aunts, and cousins, but they are flat characters who ultimately have little impact on the plot. The second segment, entitled “When I Was Dirt,” explains the genesis of the Reyes family. Much of the action is set in the besieged Mexico City, a dangerous place reduced to rubble by the ongoing Mexican Revolution. The final third resumes where the “cliffhanger” ending of Part I leaves off. Lala becomes a young teenager who must confront a complex society that both accepts and rejects her because of her race and ethnicity. Her father’s love, as well as his ongoing struggle to realize the American Dream, sustains and enervates his family.

Generally avoiding the subject of fatherhood, the initial reviews of *Caramelo* tended to address matters of tone, specifically the exuberance of Cisneros’s storytelling. Several reviewers commented on structure and style but did not make an explicit connection with the Minimalist tradition. Betsy Kline compared the book to *The House on Mango Street*, writing that Cisneros’s “choppy, episodic style, which served her so well in the astoundingly brief and breezy ‘The House on Mango Street,’ turns her new novel into a string of firecrackers, sudden bursts of color and character development. . . .”⁸ Keir Graff referred to it as a series of “coming-of-age vignettes,” and Adriana Lopez likened it to “a mosaic of sepia snapshots.”⁹ In a particularly insightful review for the *Toronto Star*, Elizabeth Johnston wrote that “structurally, the novel is composed of short, bite-sized chapters that can, most of the time, stand on their own as prose poems—an approach used to delightful ends in her much shorter novel, *The House on Mango Street*.” Johnston went on to suggest that Cisneros frequently employs the technique of

implication by omission, stating that “each chapter is a snapshot that is complete in itself, but also leaves something out, creating suspense and questions that make you turn the page. . . .”¹⁰

Ana Lopez spoke to the efficiency of Cisneros’s prose: “The real triumph of *Caramelo* is its author’s ability to paint the big picture while capturing the trifles of everyday life, giving them profound and tender meaning.”¹¹ Much of *Caramelo* seems large in scale, but it is, like many Minimalist works, a testament to the beauty that can be found in the mundane. Lala’s world is full of small, seemingly irrelevant moments.

While *Caramelo* at times seems rather simple, beneath the surface it is, among other things, a complex examination of racial, ethnic, and political boundaries. The opening third, which documents the family’s road trip from the United States into Mexico, is representative of the many types of “border crossings” that occur throughout the plot. Much of the scholarly criticism about *Caramelo* tends to focus on theoretical and social concerns, saying little about Cisneros’s style or contribution to the development of American literary aesthetics. The book is a conventional *Bildungsroman*, but it is about the coming of age of a young girl who must negotiate societal divisions and prejudices that she does not fully understand. Juanita Heredia posited that *Caramelo* is an attempt to in a broad sense preserve the histories of immigrants, writing that “Cisneros is concerned with telling the transmigratory experiences of families who wish to maintain their culture alive for the younger generation – products of a hybrid identity.”¹² In “Sandra Cisneros and Her Trade of the Free World,” Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs discussed how many of the objects incorporated into *Caramelo* are reflect historical and cultural hybridity.¹³ Heather Alumbaugh, James Phelan, and José Garcia Vizcaíno all explored narrative technique, but none of them talk about how Cisneros traverses the line between prose and poetry.¹⁴ Her authorial choices about narration carry much interpretive weight, particularly

because Lala expresses deep emotional ties to both the familial and political significance of the stories she is telling.

Part of Cisneros's Minimalist experimentation involves a measure of authorial intrusion. She occasionally talks about herself in her notes, at one point referring to herself as "the author."¹⁵ While this in one sense makes her an exception to the common Minimalist practice of self-effacement, it is important to recognize that the narrator in *Caramelo* does not tend to explain or moralize. Lala does not describe a scene and then offer an explanatory divergence, which is why the book is not overtly political. Jessica Magnani opined that "if this novel is dedicated to Cisneros's father, as well as to immigrants like him, then it seems logical to assume that the didactic inclusion of historical references is an attempt at recovering a familial and cultural past."¹⁶ Cisneros did not talk about writing as an act of "recovery," however, but rather as a means to preserve, to prevent her father from being forgotten. Allusions to name brands, places, and historical events also serve as a means of conveying details about time and setting.

Caramelo is typical of Minimalist works in that it is autobiographical and replete with historical and cultural allusions. It is atypical, however, because Cisneros includes a number of explanatory footnotes, many of which seem to offer her unique perspective on past events. She has been vocal about the idea that history is highly subjective and that those who have traditionally been marginalized must tell their own stories or, to use one of the central metaphors in *Caramelo*, "weave" their own tales. She talked about her research process in several interviews and suggested that she at times made use of unorthodox sources.¹⁷ Cisneros's lengthy descriptions of historical events are not necessarily objective: "truth" in *Caramelo* speaks more to the realities of the human condition. The epigraph to the book, "cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira" or "tell me a story, even if it's a lie," implies that factual accuracy is a secondary

concern. She seems to be having fun with the past, and her focus does not always seem set on conveying sound historical data. On the other hand, in multiple interviews Cisneros said that she was concerned with honoring and preserving the memory of her father:

“I really wanted to write about my father because I felt as if his life didn’t count. . . . He served in World War II, but people don’t think about men like my father when they think about American history. That hurt me very deeply, to have someone I cared about so much erased and forgotten once he died, as if he meant nothing.”¹⁸

While Cisneros engages in a degree of playfulness when it comes to the murky line between truth and fiction, natural and supernatural, *Caramelo* cannot be dismissed as “healthy lies” alone. Even though it is a tribute to a man she loved, it is neither autobiography nor hagiography. She admittedly confronted some of her own family’s most sensitive secrets in writing the book. For example, Alfredo Cisneros, Inocencio Reyes’s counterpart, also fathered an illegitimate daughter, and it is the fictional rendering of this fact that provides one of the most intriguing plot turns in the novel.¹⁹ Even though the events Lala describes have a direct impact on her life, she often reports what she sees as if she is providing play-by-play commentary for a film.

In the opening lines of the novel, Lala appropriately describes a brief moment in time, or *vistazo*, manifested in the form of a photograph that hangs above her father’s bed. She Impressionistically reports what was happening when it was taken: “Here are the Acapulco waters lapping just behind us, and here we are sitting on the lip of land and water. The little kids, Lolo and Memo, making devil horns behind each other’s heads; the Awful Grandmother holding them even though she never held them in real life.” She implies the light and position of the sun, declaring that “here is Father squinting that same squint I always make when I’m photographed.

He isn't *acabado* yet. He isn't finished, worn from working, from worrying, from smoking too many packs of cigarettes" (3). Lala uses the "historical present" to both render the scene and subtly talk about what is to come. In other words, she defines the past in terms of the present. Surprisingly, she admits that she is absent from the photograph, and she laments that she is "off by" herself "building sand houses" (4). It is a fitting situation given that *Caramelo* is a novel in which much is omitted yet implied. Lala describes events in generous detail but often leaves out her own emotional responses. In the end, the photograph serves multiple purposes. It is both the preservation of an incomplete "memory" as well as a contemplation of all that has happened in the years since it was created.

Cisneros's style in part grows from the intersection of South American and American Minimalism, a literary nexus that has been neglected by scholars in the United States. In combining these traditions, Cisneros makes an important contribution to the vitality of the American mode. When asked during interviews about influences, she mentioned three South American authors: Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, Brazilian Clarice Lispector, and Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano. While Cisneros's prose is not a complete technical departure from that of Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver, she mentioned Borges, Lispector, and Galeano as writers whose aesthetic affected her while writing *Caramelo*. She made specific references to Borges's *Dreamtigers* and Galeano's *The Book of Embraces* as works that directly and indirectly occupied her thoughts during the composition of the novel.²⁰ Each work is comprised of brief, prose-poetic pieces that generally include descriptive imagery and contemplation.

While Cisneros does not explicitly allude to *Book of Embraces* and *Dreamtigers* in *Caramelo*, some of her primary presuppositions seem to have been molded by Borges's and Galeano's views of history and memory. One of Cisneros's central philosophies about

subjectivity and the act of remembrance is embodied by the epigraph to *Book of Embraces*:

“Recordar: To remember; from the Latin re-cordis, to pass back through the heart.”²¹ The title of the opening section of *Caramelo* is entitled “Recuerdo de Acapulco,” or “Memory of Acapulco,” and Lala’s description of events demonstrates how emotional context shapes historical perspective. Galeano expands on this idea in many of his pieces. One of the most poignant vignettes in *Book of Embraces*, “Christmas Eve,” illustrates a human need that Cisneros frequently talked about in interviews:

Fernando Silva ran the children’s hospital in Managua. On Christmas Eve, he worked late into the night. Firecrackers were exploding and fireworks lit up the sky when Fernando decided it was time to leave. They were expecting him at home to celebrate the holiday.

He took one last look around, checking to see that everything was in order, when he heard cottony footsteps behind him. He turned to find one of the sick children walking after him. In the half light he recognized the lonely, doomed child. Fernando recognized that face already lined with death and those eyes asking for forgiveness, or perhaps permission.

Fernando walked over to him and the boy gave him his hand.

“*Tell someone, . . .*” the child whispered. “*Tell someone I’m here.*”²²

The “doomed child” expresses the same desire, a hope that someone will know that he was alive and that his life mattered. The power of Galeano’s piece is in part derived from its basis in reality; the doctor who runs the hospital has a name, a family, and lives in a real place, Managua, Nicaragua. The dying boy’s request takes place within the context of an important holiday, a day that typically reinforces deep familial bonds. Cisneros, like Galeano, is careful to construct

specific contexts for the brief episodes that comprise *Caramelo*. Her father died of cancer while she was writing it, a fact that she said motivated her.²³ *Caramelo* is essentially a manifestation of her desire to “tell” about the life and contributions of her father.

Given the intensely personal nature of Cisneros’s motivation for writing *Caramelo*, her choice of influences is fitting. Galeano’s “Christmas Eve” is an example of a type of prose-poem often used by Latin American authors called a *crônica*, or chronicle.²⁴ In his preface to a collection of *crônicas* by Brazilian author Clarice Lispector, Giovanni Pontiero described them as “aphorisms, diary entries, reminiscences, travel notes, interviews, serialized stories, essays, loosely defined as ‘chronicles’: a genre peculiar to Brazil which allows poets and writers to address a wider readership on a vast range of topics and themes.”²⁵ They are often personal in nature, and the author tends to use them as a means to publicly contemplate the enigmas of daily experience. While some of them are brief, a few lines or a single paragraph, they can go on for pages. *Crônicas* are often Impressionistic and they generally deal with intense sensorial experience; Lispector’s “Rebellion” illustrates this:

When they removed the stitches from my hand after they had operated between the fingers, I screamed with pain. I screamed with pain and anger because the pain was an insult to my physical integrity. But I was no fool. I took advantage of my pain and screamed at the past and present. I even screamed at the future, dear God.²⁶

The acuteness of Lispector’s imagery is matched by the potency of her reaction. While “Rebellion” is in some ways similar to the work of Literary Impressionists such as Stephen Crane and Anton Chekhov, it is different because they do not generally include a clearly stated philosophical conclusion. Lispector suggests that she has transferred her intense physical pain

into the mental processes of memory and a contemplation of her future, making her body subservient to the power of her imagination. Impressionists sought to capture sensation in a moment of time whereas the writers of *crônicas* wanted to preserve both sensory experience and the resulting contemplation of its meaning. Cisneros draws from the latter tradition in her desire to chronicle, and thus subjectively shape, history.

One function of the *crônica* is to combat the tragic loss of individual memories that accompanies death. In other words, it is a mechanism used to safeguard experiences that do not qualify as worthy of publication in a widely-read textbook. Cisneros explained in an interview that she viewed her family and friends as figurative museums: “I found myself drawing from families’ *memorias*, their memoirs, as well as doing some research by doing interviews with the real people, the walking Smithsonians as I like to put it, sitting down and talking to people, and then doing the research to add to that.”²⁷ Borges suggests a similar view of the richness of individual experiences in his prose-poem “The Witness”:

Events far-reaching enough to people all space, whose end is nonetheless tolled
when one man dies, may cause us wonder. But something, or an infinite
number of things, dies in every death, unless the universe is possessed of a
memory, as the theosophists have supposed.

In the course of time there was a day that closed the last eyes to see Christ.
The battle of Junín and the love of Helen each died with the death of some one
man. What will die with me when I die, what pitiful or perishable form will the
world lose? The voice of Macedonio Fernández? The image of a roan horse on the
vacant lot at Serrano and Charcas? A bar of sulphur in the drawer of a mahogany
desk?²⁸

Borges's contemplation of loss at first seems hopeless, but in the end he speaks to the value of mundane, yet valuable, moments. The final paragraph of "The Witness" begins with an evaluation that favors events that have shaped art and destiny. It concludes, however, with a recognition that there is something beautiful, and worth preserving, in everyday occurrences. Cisneros approaches her subject matter in a similar spirit. Her father was an upholsterer by trade, and in her research she observed that American literature does not include any famous upholsterers.²⁹ The point implicit in *Caramelo* is that prophets and generals, the victors who earn the spoils, are not the only people who deserve monuments. Cisneros, like Borges, not only draws attention to the richness of common life, but redefines notions of what, and who, is worth preserving.

Cisneros's incorporation of the mundane into her fiction does not, however, result in an absence of drama, a fact in part attributable to the influence of the *fotonovela* and *telenovela*. The thesis of so-called "reality television" seems to be that everyday life is as entertaining as programs filmed using scripts and various high-dollar production techniques. Lala at times works along similar lines in that she captures the visual drama of passionate arguments and tender moments, although it would be a disservice to Cisneros to state that her fiction is at all comparable to what passes for "reality television." Inocencio Reyes is a dedicated fan of *fotonovelas*, perhaps best-defined as love stories "told in photographs with balloon captions presenting the dialogue . . . omnipresent among the masses in Latin America, Northern Africa, France, and Italy."³⁰ Awful Grandmother pampers her favorite son by giving him *fotonovelas* and comic books she has kept locked away in her treasured "walnut-wood armoire." One of Cisneros's footnotes reveals that Soledad's favorites include " 'Wives There Are Plenty, But

Mothers—Only One!” and “*He Doesn’t Give a Damn What You Feel*” (63). As these titles suggest, often lurking below the surface of these entertainments is a tidy moral lesson.

The *telenovela*, a medium in some ways similar to the *fotonovela*, is comparable to a typical American soap opera.³¹ *Caramelo* is melodramatic, but more importantly it resembles these forms because it is often narrated in a highly visual manner. Lala creates an overt connection among genres. Chapter eighty-three, for example, is entitled “A Scene in a Hospital That Resembles a Telenovela When in Actuality It’s the Telenovelas That Resemble This Scene” (402). In a broad sense, the novel follows the basic formula of the *telenovela*:

Contemporary melodrama typically narrates tales in which, after a number of problematic events, misunderstandings and sufferings, the main character—a hero or a heroine (who is normally a good and tender-hearted young woman)—comes to a happy ending. The audience are well aware of the outcome. But they want to know how that ending will be produced and delayed—what forms of suspense will delay the resolution of the problem until the very end. That has been the structure of melodrama throughout Latin American cultural history.³²

While Cisneros’s men and women tend to be both heroic and deeply flawed, Lala’s narratives are often organized around dramatic events that find resolution in empathic moments. Cisneros uses these instances, however, to conceal “truths” that reside beneath the surface of the plot.

Cisneros uses melodrama as a device, a means to submerge important information. O. Hugo Benavides articulated how this technique works when he wrote that “melodrama in itself is invested in exploring the emotions and sentiments, not the hidden rationality behind human relationships and interactions.”³³ As is so often the case with the protagonists in Minimalistic fiction, Lala sometimes responds to her inability to verbalize her feelings about the occurrences

she is describing by omitting essential facts. For example, the fifteen-year-old's decision to elope to Mexico with her boyfriend, Ernesto Calderón, is in part motivated by an intense, unstated need for paternal affection. While she knows that she is her father's favorite child, work monopolizes his time while the family lives in San Antonio. One of the leitmotifs in her narration is that she is constantly being passed over or ignored, such as when her father introduces his six sons and single daughter as his *siete hijos*, or seven sons. Lala's running away demonstrates a need for attention, similar to the episode in Susan Minot's "Allowance" when Gus steals his father's wallet and then dramatically "finds" it in the bushes during the family's search with the hopes that his father will give him some type of positive consideration. Rarely does Lala struggle with ineffability, but when her father comes down to Mexico City to "rescue" her after she has been abandoned by Ernesto, she is unable to tell him how much she loves him. She embraces him and explains "my mouth opens and closes and the only thing that comes out is a thin, slippery howl, like raw silk unspooling from my belly" (395). Even though the scene is sentimental, Lala's visceral reactions are honest and sincere.

"St. Anthony," the seventy-third chapter of *Caramelo*, illustrates how Cisneros synthesizes the philosophical and stylistic conventions of the *telenovela* and the South American *crónica* with techniques common to the American Minimalist tradition. Lala describes a simple domestic scene. In the first paragraph-stanza, she juxtaposes the image of Inocencio's worn hands with an explanation of why his sacrifice is significant:

Father's hands are numb from working on a set of lounge chairs for the Saint Anthony Hotel. Leather is rough on the hands. His hands calloused from tugging the twine hard and taut. After six days, he comes home and can't untie his own shoes, his hands swell as fat as a mattress of needles. It's a good job, one he

can't afford to pass up. We need the money, and landing the hotel account is something father is proud of (385).

Lala sees what her father has given for his family, although she does not have any illusions about what he is working for: security. The beginning of the next paragraph subtly suggests the passage of time:

But now his hands are as big as Popeye's. He's so tired he eats his dinner on a TV tray in the living room. —Please, a bucket of hot water for my feet and another one for my hands. Mother brings him two plastic buckets, one for each foot, and two dish tubs for his hands. Then Father just lies there splayed in his La-Z-Boy. Mother feeds him *albóndigas*, Mexican meatballs, with fresh flour tortillas, because that's what Father loves best. She feeds him herself, as if she is feeding a baby.

—Your father works hard, she says (358).

Zoila respects Inocencio, and in this scene she acknowledges him for his dedication to the family. This scene takes place in Part III of the novel, after she has learned that her husband fathered Candelaria with Awful Grandmother's servant, Oralia. Zoila's caring approach suggests that she is willing to "mother" her ailing husband in light of his labor. Lala's careful descriptions are reflective of Cisneros's respect for her own father's industriousness. She said in an interview that

"I've done what I set out to do, which is to honor my father. I wanted to honor him and all the hard work that he did. At the end of his life, he said the meaning of his life was to labor honorably. Well, I had to labor very hard to write this

book. I think my father showed me a lot about taking pride in your craft—he taught me a lot.”³⁴

“St. Anthony” is in multiple ways a tribute to craftsmanship. Despite its brevity and seeming simplicity, it is a complex narrative.

Through the use of allusion, Cisneros adds interpretive density to “St. Anthony.” The title refers to the Portuguese Saint Anthony of Padua, considered by Roman Catholics a patron saint of travel, lost items, and against starvation, all of which are pertinent to Cisneros’s primary themes.³⁵ In the prose-poem, Lala subtly addresses concepts of loss: Inocencio is in obvious pain, and the fact that his wife must feed him like “a baby” suggests that the situation is somewhat humiliating. St. Anthony was venerated in part because he continued his ministry despite ongoing sickness, a fortitude emulated by Inocencio.³⁶ Lala’s narrative choices indicate how as a young teenager she is on the figurative borderlands of maturity and immaturity. Her reference to Popeye, a cartoon character who gains superhuman strength by eating spinach, reflects her own youthfulness at the time she is telling the story. Her description of her father “splayed in his La-Z-Boy” chair is imagistically contradictory; he is tired because of industriousness and deserves a few quiet moments of “laziness.”

Cisneros frequently alludes to popular culture, particularly name brands like La-Z-Boy, as a means to differentiate among cultural settings. In chapter four, “Mexico, Next Right,” she uses a compact, paratactic style along with a sensorial reportage common in Minimalist fiction. This passage subtly suggests the differences Lala sees when crossing the border from the United States into Mexico:

No more billboards announcing the next Stuckey’s candy store, no more truck-stop donuts or roadside picnics with bologna-and-cheese sandwiches and cold

bottles of 7-Up. Now we'll drink fruit-flavored sodas, tamarind, apple, pineapple; Pato Pascual with Donald Duck on the bottle, or Lulú, Betty Boop soda, or the one we hear on the radio, the happy song for Jarritos soda (17).

In this passages, Lala's narration is direct and synesthetic. Her thoughts and feelings reflect the physical process of realizing that she has moved into a different world. As the chapter progresses, Cisneros's prose becomes more fragmentary, her sentences poetic, sensorial bursts:

Sweets sweeter, colors brighter, the bitter more bitter. A cage of parrots all the rainbow colors of Lulú sodas. Pushing a window out to open it instead of pulling it up. A cold slash of door latch in your hand instead of the dull round doorknob. Tin sugar spoon and how surprised the hand feels because it's so light. Children walking to school in the morning their hair still wet from the morning bath (17).

Similar to Hamlin Garland's "Chicago Studies" and sections of McInerney's *Bright Lights*, Lala describes brief moments in time. The last line is the most traditionally Impressionistic because of its reference to the time of day, a detail that implies the position of the light. Lala's reportage indicates that she does not synthesize any of the things she sees, hears, feels, or imagines herself tasting. In other words, she is neither contemplating the social or cultural significance of the moment of crossing the border nor attempting explain what her sensations mean. In an interview with Fritz Lanham for *The Houston Chronicle*, Cisneros offered an explanation of why she includes these types of "lists": "I remember things viscerally in my body. So I always start there. It might be just a smell. I don't know where it's going to take me or why it's important, but I trust that if it stayed in my body, it's important."³⁷ Lala's first-person, present tense narration conveys a strong sense of immediacy.

One of the most subtle yet well-crafted adjustments Cisneros makes as the novel progresses is in the voice of Lala. The youthful exuberance of the first part is matched by a distinctly teenaged malaise in the third. Cisneros continues her use of parataxis, but Lala's impressions are more negative, reflecting her general sense of purposelessness at this time in her life. While the family is in San Antonio, Lala begins at a Catholic school called Immaculate Conception. Because of the Reyes's ongoing financial problems, she is ultimately allowed to leave the school she despises and move to "Davy Crockett, the public school across the freeway." She is not initially content with her new surroundings, calling it

Davy Crock-of-shit Vocational. Home of the Future Farmers of America.

Livestock shows. Rodeos. Majorettes twirling batons. Home Ec. Machine Shop.

The Davy Crockett marching band with cheerleaders in raccoon hats and fringed booties. Creeps in nerdy glasses and crew cuts. Girls still wearing their hair poufed into a Patty Duke bubble. Super-straight. Like they escaped from the fifties, I'm not kidding (352).

The energy of the young Lala's sense of discovery is re-routed into absurd images that betray her feelings of discontent. The scenes she describes imply that she is superior to her new classmates, that they are not "cool" enough, but they are evidence of her own misgivings about being in a new place. Her peers have goals, and it is interesting that she disapprove of their ambitions even though they are, like her father's, vocational. More accurately, she rejects her classmates' choice of work because they remind her of her father. Lala is subtly directing her anger at Inocencio, motivated by his decision to move the family to San Antonio only to continue to struggle financially, at the kids around her. The "St. Anthony" chapter, which follows Lala's rant about

Davy Crockett, represents Lala's maturation in that she is able to put aside her selfish pride and see her father's assiduousness.

Lala's emotional reconciliation with her father reflects the central theme of the novel, which is that seemingly disparate strands of human experience are inextricably "interwoven." Minimalist authors frequently imbue everyday possessions with profound emotional significance, often because these objects represent feelings that the protagonist is unable to verbalize or explain. The material item invested most with physical and emotional feeling is the *caramelo rebozo*, or traditional striped shawl, woven together and passed down from its maker, great-grandmother Guillermina, to Awful Grandmother, and then to Lala. One of the most poignant images in the book occurs when Lala chews the fringes of the unfinished shawl as a means to calm herself, using physical sensation as a means to transport herself to another time and place (388). Cisneros's quality as a storyteller is in part attributable to her ability to craft a cohesive piece of art from incongruous, generationally divided characters in the same way a weaver creates a masterpiece from different threads.

Critics such as Jordana Finnegan and Gabriella Guitiérrez y Muhs examined the cultural richness of the *rebozo*, its complex hybridity, but it is also a subtle allusion to Borges's use of tiger imagery.³⁸ When asked during an interview why he frequently used the animal in his fiction, Borges replied, "Chesterton said that the tiger was a symbol of terrible elegance. What a lovely phrase, don't you think so? The tiger's terrible elegance. . . ."³⁹ Chesterton's description of the tiger, and Borges's perpetuation of it in his work, is reflected within the complex interpretive significance of the *rebozo*. Lala describes it as "an exquisite *rebozo* of five *tiras*, the cloth a beautiful blend of toffee, licorice, and vanilla stripes flecked with black and white, which is why they call this design a *caramelo*" (94). Like many of the characters in the novel, the

caramelo *rebozo* emits a “terrible elegance” not only because of its tiger-like stripes but because of its colorful past.

Lala does not speak of her treasured *rebozo* as simply a symbol of happiness or as a quaint cultural artifact. Great-grandmother Guillermina died before she could finish it, so it was created under tragic circumstances and stands incomplete. The elaborate design represents a full range of human experience, the ugly and the ebullient. Cisneros promulgates a distinctly anti-Manichean view of good and evil and illustrates how humans are a paradoxical mixture of destructive and constructive impulses. Awful Grandmother’s near-universal rudeness is countered by her stern toughness in the midst of trying circumstances; Narciso’s brazen sexuality and disloyalty are offset by his gentleness; and Inocencio’s careless immaturities are often forgotten when he shows love for his favorite child, Lala. The Reyes family’s history draws its vibrancy from lives that metaphorically reflect the intricacy and “terrible elegance” of a striped *rebozo*.

Cisneros’s ability to infuse complexity into seemingly simple images and objects places her among the best of the American Minimalists. While she adheres to the central techniques of the tradition, she brings to it a new vitality by incorporating the aesthetic and philosophies of South American authors. The compactness of her chapters mirrors that of the *crônica*, and the novel is thus structured as a series of “little moments” valuable not because of their cultural importance but because of their individual and collective beauty. Attributable in part to the fecundity of the traditions that influenced it, *Caramelo* is a stylistic *tour de force*. In the context of one of Cisneros’s central metaphors, her writing crosses borders and transcends simple classifications. Her great strength is that she does not repeat herself or settle for mimicking

previous generations of authors. Her fiction is not a complete departure from that of Hemingway, Carver, Galeano, and Borges, but it has a unique character and emotion.

Even though *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* are his only distinctly Minimalistic works, Cormac McCarthy has, like Cisneros, established himself as a master of the style. Both authors write in a vibrant, poetic prose that shows a profound respect for literary tradition and, more importantly, language itself. *The Road* is, like *Caramelo*, a journey novel that centers on the life of a family. The milieus could not be more different, but there are thematic similarities. McCarthy's father and son seek to physically and mentally survive in a post-apocalyptic world. Surrounded by darkness and brutality, they find themselves in a constant struggle to maintain their identity and, more broadly, their humanity. They are, in other words, engaged in an act of preservation. Reflecting an attribute of memory, which tends to be incomplete, Cisneros and McCarthy construct their narratives as a series of precise, fragmentary images.

In a rare interview with Oprah Winfrey, McCarthy recounted that a single image inspired him to begin *The Road*. Staring out the window of an El Paso hotel room, his young son John Francis McCarthy asleep on a bed behind him, he wondered how what he saw might be different five or ten decades into the future. He imagined "fires up on the hill and everything being laid waste" and "though a lot about" his "little boy." McCarthy wrote a couple of pages, thinking the fragments might be incorporated into a longer piece, but during a trip to Ireland four years later realized they were the beginnings of a new work.⁴⁰ In comparison with his earlier books *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*, *The Road* is unusually efficient, perhaps best classified as a long prose-poem.⁴¹ The compactness of the language is more reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway's Minimalist fiction than that of "maximalists" such as William Faulkner and John Updike. *The Road* is anomalous to its era, a piece that returns to a literary mode dismissed as passé nearly two

decades earlier. True to the aesthetic legacy of the Imagists, McCarthy includes no ancillary words or insignificant images, achieving depth through allusion and implication.

The Road is a typical McCarthy novel as it does not feature a particularly intricate plot. The protagonists are referred to as “the man” and “the boy,” although the latter often refers to his father as “Papa.” The man’s sacrificial love for his son generates emotional depth and power, and it is remarkable how the tenderness of their relationship transcends the violence and poverty of the world they inhabit. About eight years have passed since a cataclysmic event led to the destruction of the ecology of Earth. Given that the boy was born in the days immediately following the occurrence, he is probably seven or eight. The man is aged between forty-five and fifty-five: when he is in his childhood home, he feels the mantle and sees “the pinholes from tacks that had held stockings forty years ago.”⁴² All animal and plant-life has died off, and fires have reduced much of the landscape to ash. Food is scarce, and most of what remains is preserved in jars and cans. Father and son begin somewhere in the American South, probably what once was Kentucky, and are headed to the southeastern coast in the hopes of finding a warmer climate.⁴³ Early on, the man coughs into the snow and leaves “a fine mist of blood,” indicating that he is suffering from a lung condition that will soon cause his death (30). The path father and son travel is perilous, and they are in a constant state of fear mixed with vigilance. After encounters with marauders, thieves, and castoffs, the two finally arrive in a swampy area near the ocean, likely somewhere in southern Georgia or northern Florida. Weakened by his lung condition, the man passes away. After three days, the boy is found by a well-armed survivor and his family; the suggestion is that they have been tracking the father and son and decided to approach the boy. The child has seemingly been “rescued,” but it seems to matter little given the fragility of the planet. On the other hand, he and his father have been “carrying the fire” (83), an

amorphous inner power that is not explained, and there is hope in knowing that his “quest” will continue.

The father and son’s journey is narrated in a terse, poetic style characteristic of works of American Minimalism. McCarthy’s descriptions of landscapes tend to be reportorial, emphasizing sensorial experience over narrative exposition. In sharp, staccato sentences the narrator says that

they moved on east through the standing dead trees. They passed an old frame house and crossed a dirt road. A cleared plot of ground perhaps once a truckgarden. Stopping from time to time to listen. The unseen sun cast no shadow. They came upon a road unexpectedly and he stopped the boy with one hand they crouched in the roadside ditch like lepers and listened. No wind. Dead silence (68-69).

McCarthy deftly sustains a sense of foreboding by implying the emotional state of his characters. Images of “standing dead trees” and “a cleared plot of ground” are objective correlatives that speak to the lifelessness of the land and the physical decay that has been brought about by the passing of time. McCarthy employs a technique common in Literary Impressionism when he indirectly describes the darkness of the scene by referring to “the unseen sun.” Passages such as these exemplify the Imagist axiom that calls for “direct treatment,” or no wasted words. In a review of *The Road* for the *Grand Rapids Press*, Laura Philpot Benedict maintained that “there are no extraneous words here, no oblique references or irritating inside jokes. . . .”⁴⁴ Cliff Froehlich posited that the content and style are well-matched, writing that “form sharply mirrors content, a basic story of survival related in terse sentences, telegraphic dialogue and surprisingly simple language.”⁴⁵ McCarthy uses many of the same devices common in Polyphonic Prose,

incorporating poetic techniques such as simile and alliteration: “they crouched in the roadside ditch like lepers and listened.” Kenneth Lincoln identified “anapests, reverse spondaic feet, and alliterative rhythms” in his scansion of the opening sentence of the book: “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.”⁴⁶ Arranged differently on the page, many of McCarthy’s lines could pass for verse.

Stylistically consistent with the descriptive passages, conversations between father and son are generally brief and direct. Given the emotional and physical energy the boy and his Papa expend each day, the laconic nature of their discussions reflects their mental state. Mark Schechner of the *Buffalo News* opined that the dialogue “is a little like Ernest Hemingway on Valium, and in a world in which articulate conversation is really beside the point, why even bother? The catastrophe has robbed people of the power of speech, or created a habitation that is not very interesting to talk about.”⁴⁷ Schechner’s dismissive comments suggest that he did not fully consider the effects of the environment on the father and son. It is not that the man and the boy have nothing to say, or that they have lost a desire to speak with one another, but that their reality is not conducive to intellectual and philosophical banter. They are usually tired, hungry, and afraid. The man sleeps little at night. The boy often says that he is scared, but he is unable or unwilling to articulate the cause of his fears. Early in the novel, the man visits his childhood home, a decision that causes the boy to feel a deep unease. The last words they share before leaving the house provides a typical example of their dialogue:

We should go, Papa. Can we go?

Yes. We can go.

I’m scared.

I know. I’m sorry.

I'm really scared.

It's all right. We shouldn't have come (27).

The boy is most nervous when his father explores the unknown interiors of abandoned enclosures. His apprehension is not so much based on the possibility of his own death but rather that something will happen to his father, leaving him alone. He knows that his dad is dying, however, and his reticence is in part driven by his desire to assure his mentor that he is committed to learning how to survive. As is often the case in Minimalistic works, much meaning can be derived from what is left unsaid.

The laconic dialogue is also attributable to the disappearance of the objects signified by words. Because the boy was born into a burned-out environment, he does not know what a “neighborhood” is or the meaning of the phrase “as the crow flies” as he has no point of reference for either thing (95, 156). One evening while sitting by a fire, the man “tried to think of something to say but could not.” The narrator relays his thoughts:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those thing into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believes to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality (88-89).

The man is a far more developed character than the boy in part because the narrator is closely attuned to him, but the implication is that there is a persistent linguistic divide separating father and son. Papa is older and better-educated, but the gap between them is in some respects most acute because they see the world differently. One night the man wakes and looks at his child, and the narrator says that “maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an

alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed” (153). In order to communicate, they must slowly build a language derived from common experiences.

Because the narration is composed of brief, independent sensorial moments rather than a fluid, tightly constructed plot, *The Road* is structurally fragmentary. McCarthy said in an interview that he does not “plot things out” beforehand when he writes, suggesting that chronology and setting are matters he deals with later in the compositional process.⁴⁸ *The Road* is unified by characters, themes, and the geographical movement of the central figures. The timeline is generally linear but the perspective sometimes shifts into the man’s mind, leading to either remembrances of dreams, his thoughts in the moment, or expository flashbacks. This discontinuity is likely a product of the fact that McCarthy wrote each part separately and then integrated them as he progressed. For example, the dream about the sightless, translucent creature described in the opening pages of the book was originally written as part of a section called “Cave.” The scene in which the man and boy enter a large, relatively well-preserved home and find a group of captured people about to be cannibalized is entitled “The Manse.”⁴⁹

The fragmentary quality of the plot mirrors the state of the man’s mind, particularly his memory. The narrator is a conduit for the man, a third-person observer with “limited omniscience,” who never enters into the consciousness of the boy. Hemingway often employs the same technique in his Nick Adams stories, and the mixture of reminiscence and current action found in *The Road* is similar to Hemingway’s episodic short story “Fathers and Sons.” McCarthy is at times able to seamlessly meld thought and sensory experience without the opacity endemic to stream of consciousness. Near the middle of the novel father and son are starving and desperate, and the narrator says that

they scabbled through the charred ruins of houses they would not have entered before. A corpse floating in the black water of a basement among the trash and rusting ductwork. He stood in a livingroom partly burned and open to the sky. The waterbuckled boards sloping away into the yard. Soggy volumes in a bookcase. He took one down and opened it and then put it back. Everything damp. Rotting. In a drawer he found a candle. No way to light it. He put it in his pocket.

McCarthy transitions from pure reportage into the man's thoughts, a paratactic description of his bleak, incoherent mental perceptions:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it (130).

The man does not express a consistent personal philosophy, but in his most desperate moments he embraces the "absolute truth" of an indifferent, uncaring universe.⁵⁰ He is broken by both the disappearance of a world he is slowly forgetting and the constant possibility of death. The structure of the novel aptly reflects the fluctuations of his mindset, the tensions within him generated by a desire to live in the present rather than sentimentally mourn a world that has been lost.

The precision with which McCarthy explores the psyche of a man constantly under duress is in part a product of his judicious editing. The "Cave" dream-sequence underwent numerous changes early in the compositional process. On the first of thirteen pages of the "first

draft,” McCarthy wrote four heavily-marked paragraphs. The first speaks of a woman, perhaps a figure that represents the man’s deceased wife:

A mere and ~~substanceless~~ ((spectral)) elflet squatting upon the red windowbench
watching her sleep with those incendiary eyes pooled like hot slag in the hairless
skull.⁵¹

He keeps little of this in the hand-written version, expanding on the image of the “elflet”:

Something white and translucent caught in the momentary light of ((where)) a
visitor ((has)) fallen through by chance into a nameless grotto, a thing blinking
with ~~blind~~ eyes, its white ((alabaster)) bones ~~secluded in shade~~ ((repeated)) upon
the rock behind it, its brain beating in a glass bell, looking up from a rimstone
pool with that she water dripping from its bloodless mouth and then loping off *
into the (soundless) millennial dark.⁵²

In subsequent drafts, McCarthy used a number of adjectival phrases and similes to describe the creature’s eyes, including “eyes opaque and whited,” “eyes dead white and sightless,” “blank and lidless attic eyes,” “eyes as bald as eggs,” and “eyes the color of a spider’s eggs.”⁵³ McCarthy’s drafts demonstrate that he is a scrupulous editor, a writer who tries a number of word combinations before settling on the best rhythmical fit. The final product achieves poetic melliflence and sonority:

And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone
pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of
spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it
could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones
cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain

that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark (3-4).

The beast itself suggests a wearied, mutated horse, an animal that McCarthy has written about frequently in his novels, perhaps most memorably in the Border Trilogy. While the image is a product of the man's subconscious, it may be associated with something he saw in a vignette cut from the final version of the book. In his second draft, he wrote a scene in which father and son watch "the last horse" cornered "by a horde of ragged starvelings" and its throat cut. The mob tears open and eats the carcass, evidence of their barbarity and desperation. Even though the creature in the dream is not aggressive, there is something discomfiting about it because it seems to have survived a crippling, near-death experience. The man's imagining of the beast's internal organs also suggest his former occupation.⁵⁴

McCarthy follows Hemingway's Iceberg Principle in *The Road*, using a series of implicative images and details to suggest that the man was once a doctor. His former occupation is significant in terms of character development, particularly because it influences the many ethical decisions he makes during his journey. The earliest indication that the man once practiced medicine occurs during the "Cave" dream sequence. He has studied the internal map of the human body and would be able to easily envision a creature's innards, "its bowels, its beating heart" and a brain in a "dull glass bell," images that perhaps hearken back to his days studying cadavers and medical-school specimens. During a flashback to the boy's birth, a scene reminiscent of Hemingway's "Indian Camp," the man uses "gloves meant for dishwashing" to deliver the baby and the narrator says that his wife's "cries meant nothing to him" (59).⁵⁵ His seeming indifference to her pain is a product of his training; he is focused on the task at hand and

feels comfortable with what he is doing. His even emotions suggest that he is a professional, not that he does not care about his wife. He exercises a similarly stoic demeanor near the end of the novel when he sutures a deep, three-inch laceration in his own leg after being grazed by an arrow: “He took a clamp from the kit and caught the needle in the jaws and locked them and set about suturing the wound. He worked quickly and he took no great pains about it” (266). The implication is that this is something he has done numerous times and is now a natural part of his skill set.

Passages that appear in the manuscripts but omitted from the final version of the novel also suggest that the man once practiced medicine. Ruminating on the new state of civilization, the narrator says that he

knew that there were doctors and other men of skill who would not come forward in that world. Doctors who would pass the dying in a ditch and move on. So that there was no one to fix the simplest thing. You worked on your own problems in the dark and you couldn't let anyone know you could do special things. If you were a doctor or an engineer or had some other skill and it were found out you would be enslaved by one of the communes for their own purposes. So no one could do anything. No one had any skills.⁵⁶

In an earlier draft, possibly a version of the same paragraph, McCarthy's narrator says that “there were men of skill who would never come forward in that world. He'd been one himself. Doctors who would pass the dying in a ditch.”⁵⁷ Offering further evidence that the man was once “a doctor or an engineer,” McCarthy wrote that the man “would have gone to one of the communes long ago ((and offered his services)) but he knew what would happen to the boy.”⁵⁸ The implication is that his skills are a commodity that can lead to enslavement, but McCarthy also

suggests that the man would find emotional relief by acquiescing to his humanitarian impulses. Physicians are no doubt in high demand as no one in *The Road* is physically healthy; environmental hazards and a lack of fresh food have left all survivors bodily and mentally degraded.

In one of the most important scenes in the novel, the man is given the opportunity to declare that he is a doctor but declines. Father and son are hiding from a truck driven by a group of marauders and accidentally come upon one of them in the woods. During an intense standoff, the man aims his revolver at the cannibal, to which the latter responds,

You aint got but two shells. Maybe just one. And they'll hear the shot.

Yes they will, but you wont.

How do you figure that?

Because the bullet travels faster than sound. It will be in your brain before you can hear it. To hear it you will need a frontal lobe and things with names colliculus and temporal gyrus and you wont have them anymore. They'll just be soup.

Are you a doctor?

I'm not anything (64).

The man renounces his former career because his context no longer allows him to act in response to his desire to help others. His use of medical jargon, terms such as “colliculus” and “temporal gyrus,” is an attempt to intellectually intimidate the other man. When the soldier grabs the boy and threatens to kill him with his knife, the man shoots him in the forehead. As he later explains to his son, his purpose in life has changed according to his circumstances: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you

understand?" (77). He does not have the time, resources, or security to help those in need, so he must distance himself from his past and from others. The boy often wants to help starving fellow travelers, but the father knows that doing so could jeopardize his survival and that of his son. After a violent storm, the pair comes upon a ragged man walking in the road. The child asks,

Papa? . . . What is wrong with the man?

He's been struck by lightning.

Cant we help him? Papa?

No. We cant help him.

The boy kept pulling at his coat. Papa? he said.

Stop it.

Cant we help him Papa?

No. We cant help him. There's nothing to be done for him (50).

Although the narrator does not reveal the man's reasons for refusing his son's request, the suggestion is that ignoring the injured man runs against his instincts. His situation, however, does not allow him to act according to his pre-catastrophe conscience. The extremity of his shift into being "not anything" is also reflected by his modification of the tenets of the Hippocratic Oath, specifically the promise that a doctor "will not give a drug that is deadly to anyone if asked [for it], nor will I suggest the way to such counsel."⁵⁹ Even though this part of the creed warns physicians against murder, the man is not in violation for killing an aggressor or refusing to help those in obvious need. His willingness to take his son's life lest he be captured, raped, and killed, however, is a much more complicated matter.

Suicide and euthanasia are prominent in *The Road*, ethical topics that the man begrudgingly contemplates as his surroundings darken. During a flashback to a conversation

between the man and his wife, he ruminates on the night she determined to kill herself. She tells her husband that he is unable to protect her and their son and that “sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it” (56). Her “only hope is for eternal nothingness” (57), and it drives her to disappear into the wilderness and slit her wrists with a shard of obsidian. The mother is placed in opposition to her light-bearing husband and son, those who have determined that there is something worth seeking in a burned-out world. The man is not entirely unsympathetic to her position, however, in that he often gives the gun to his son when he leaves him. The understanding they have is that if something happens to the man and the boy is discovered by the “bad guys,” he is to put the barrel in his mouth and shoot himself (113). At other times, the former doctor ponders whether he could take his son’s life if circumstances call for it:

Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesn’t fire? It has to fire. What if it doesn’t fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly (114).

The man’s ethical struggle is shaped by the tension between his faith in his “mission” and his assessment of reality. He has determined that even though he is emotionally disgusted with the thought of destroying the boy, the unraveling of a civil society and the threat of violence make such an action necessary. Proclamations about the sanctity of life no longer seem applicable; endless visions of sadistic acts suggest that sacrality has become an empty concept.

McCarthy modeled the lawless, depraved social atmosphere depicted in *The Road* upon biblical source material. He openly acknowledged that his works are influenced by others, saying in a 1992 interview that “the ugly fact is books are made out of books. . . . The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written.”⁶⁰ The manuscripts suggest that McCarthy was interested in the Old Testament story of Abraham, recounted in chapters eleven through twenty-two of the Book of Genesis. In his first draft, he wrote “Kierkegaard: Abraham and Isaac” on leaf fifty-one, perhaps as a note to himself.⁶¹ Søren Kierkegaard published an essay entitled “Fear and Trembling” under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, and it is a convoluted exploration of whether Abraham acted ethically in agreeing to sacrifice Isaac in response to God’s request. Even though Isaac was pardoned, Abraham was willing to carry out the command, a fact that calls into question whether he harbored murderous impulses. Kierkegaard concludes that Abraham was a “Knight of Faith,” a man who transcended natural laws against murder and “as the single individual . . . became higher than the universal.”⁶² The protagonist in *The Road* is similar to Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith in his belief that he was “appointed by God” to care for his son. The divine sanctification of his acts informs all of his moral thought processes, trumping whatever humanitarian impulses he may feel. Like Abraham, he too is spared from having to kill his son.

The parallels between *The Road* and the story of Abraham extend far beyond the episode involving Isaac. Even though the plots are set nearly two thousand years apart, the social contexts are similar. Abraham was born nine generations after the flood that destroyed the earth, and Isaac was brought into the world not long after the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In other words, they lived in barbarous, violent times. In one episode, Abraham is called to rescue his nephew Lot when he is kidnapped in the aftermath of a battle fought in the

Valley of Siddim. The lawlessness and sexual predation described in Genesis 19 is mirrored in McCarthy's post-cataclysmic world. In the years after the war, the "cities of the plain" were razed because of the iniquities of the citizenry. When Lot harbors two angels in his home in Sodom, they are besieged by "all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old." The townsmen surround the house and demand that Lot release the angels so that they can rape them. Desiring to show his loyalty to his divine visitors, Lot offers them his daughters instead, but the mob refuses.⁶³ In that moment, the guests assure Lot that Sodom will be destroyed. McCarthy iterates a theme common in the Old Testament: humankind is inherently destructive and often brings evil upon itself.

While the destruction described in Genesis can be attributed to human sin and a resulting expression of divine wrath, the cause of the conflagration that has destroyed much, or perhaps all, of the surface of the earth in *The Road* is not explicitly revealed. It is implied, however. The details McCarthy offers suggest that the man and his family are surprised at what has happened and that they were in no way expecting a cataclysmic event. In a brief flashback, the narrator says that "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 didn't answer" (52). The configuration of the collisions would be consistent with a nuclear missile equipped with multiple warheads. The man's refusal to answer his wife's question suggests that the attack was unexpected and unlike anything he has experienced before. The man immediately fills his tub, knowing that drinking water may become scarce (52-53). In his essay "Life of War, Death of the Rest: The Shining Path of Cormac McCarthy's Thermonuclear America," Tim Blackmore wrote that "McCarthy's book opens after some kind of undetermined human-created global spasm of destruction," a reading that implicitly dismisses the possibility of an asteroid or comet strike.⁶⁴

While the ecological effects of such an event would be similar to that of nuclear fallout, a militaristic, man-made cause is more likely given that human depravity is one of the central concepts explored in *The Road*.⁶⁵ Manuscript evidence also supports the theory that McCarthy considered war as the catalyst.

McCarthy composed two lines in an early draft that suggest that the natural world has been destroyed by a global conflict. In what he titled “Old Road Notes,” he wrote “~~So pale and thin. These dead have seen an end to war.~~”⁶⁶ Devoid of context, these sentences probably refer to some of the many corpses that the father and son see during their journey. On the next leaf, the narrator describes survivors as “children of the late last wars shuffling through the ashes.”⁶⁷ McCarthy eventually cut all references to war with the lone exception of a description of a barbaric group marching with pregnant women and leather-collared catamites in tow (91-92). *The Road* is thematically consistent with the rest of McCarthy’s oeuvre. From Marion Sylder, the whiskey-running murderer in *The Orchard Keeper*, to the bloodthirsty Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* and the cannibalistic “bloodcults” that constantly threaten the man and the boy, McCarthy shows no restraint in his portrayals of human depravity. People fight and enslave because, he suggests, such actions are inherent to human nature.

The Road is thus about two people coping with the emotional and physical wounds of a war the narrator says virtually nothing about. Father and son survive because they adhere to a strict code of behavior, committing to heart rules about when to hide, when to travel, and what to look for when scouring various enclosures such as homes and cars. The man maintains his sanity by focusing his mind on the minor tasks and rituals that fill his day; when he synthesizes the meaning of what he is seeing and doing, his thoughts often tend towards violence and hopelessness. His psychological state, as well as his coping mechanisms, are remarkably similar

to that of Hemingway's Nick Adams, the protagonist in "Big Two-Hearted River." Stylistically similar to *The Road*, the tale is about Nick's fishing trip into the Michigan woods, a journey devised as a means for him to maintain a frail hold on his psyche. He has returned from World War I emotionally splintered, and the implication is that the methodical actions of setting up camp, eating, cooking, and fishing are therapeutic.⁶⁸ In the first paragraph of "River," Hemingway describes the burned-out town of Seney, Michigan, a scene that could have been taken directly from McCarthy's novel.⁶⁹ The image perhaps reminds Nick of the battlefield, of villages he has seen during his service, but as Thomas H. Schaub posited, he "takes reassurance in knowing that 'the river was still there'." The man and his son have nothing similar to offer them solace.⁷⁰ All three figures, however, have the promise of simple but necessary rituals.

McCarthy and Hemingway's characters carry out tasks with ease and industry. Following the code and doing things the "right way" means survival. After arriving at a proper site, Nick sees that

between two jack pines, the ground was quite level. He took the ax out of the pack and chopped out two projecting roots. That leveled a piece of ground large enough to sleep on. He smoothed out the sandy soil with his hand and pulled all the sweet fern bushes by their roots. His hands smelled good from the sweet fern. He smoothed the uprooted earth. He did not want anything making lumps under the blankets. When he had the ground smooth, he spread his three blankets. One he folded double, next to the ground. The other two he spread on top.⁷¹

Nick takes pleasure in these tasks, and the suggestion is that they allow him to take his mind away from the war, allowing him to feel "happy." His actions also imply that if he chooses a proper place to sleep he will rest well and enjoy his time fishing, meaning that his mind will

ultimately benefit from his attention to detail. McCarthy includes many similar passages. The narrator of *The Road* describes how during a search of a wrecked ship the man

unlatched and raised the hatch to the engine compartment. Half flooded and pitch dark. No smell of gas or oil. He closed it again. There were lockers built into the benches in the cockpit that held cushions, sailcanvas, fishing gear. In a locker behind the wheel pedestal he found coils of nylon rope and steel bottles of gas and a toolbox made of fiberglass. He sat in the floor of the cockpit and sorted through the tools (226-27)

The father's diligence in looking for useful items means the difference between death and survival. He is deliberate in his search, constantly weighing the potential usefulness of what he sees. The unfortunate difference between the man and Nick is that the former rarely feels anything resembling happiness. He is, however, "stirred" when he comes across a brass sextant, an object pleasing in itself but one that also reminds him of the beauty of stars he can no longer see (227-28). He does not contemplate for long, knowing that he must soon return to his emotionally fragile son.

The man's deliberate actions, his commitment to structure, are also intended to help his son maintain some semblance of his innocence, to be able to have some sort of childhood despite the ugliness of their environment. Of the many texts alluded to in *The Road*, a list that might include Dante's *Inferno* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Hemingway's "Indian Camp" is perhaps the most influential in terms of thematic development. McCarthy makes two overt references to the tale, both of which subtly aid in the construction of theme. The first occurs during the flashback in which the man delivers his son. The second is when the man thinks back to when he was a boy and he and his grandfather went out on the lake together in search of

firewood. The man remembers “sitting in the back of the rowboat trailing his hand in the cold wake while his uncle bent to the oars” (12). The image echoes the final scene of “Indian Camp” in which Nick sits in the stern while his father rows: “The sun was coming up over the hills. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water. Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning.” The idyllic atmosphere is somewhat illusory, however, given that the young Nick, probably seven or eight years-old, has seen an impromptu caesarean section and a bloody suicide.⁷²

The serene surface of McCarthy’s image is also in part shadowed by violence. The narrator says that this memory was for the man “the perfect day of his childhood. This to shape the days upon” (13). It is interesting, however, that he built his ideal upon an outing engendered by a catastrophic event. The firewood that the boy and his grandfather are out collecting is the stumps from “the windfall trees of a hurricane years past” (13). In his notes, McCarthy set this scene at the man’s “grandfather’s summer house on the lake in Maine,” and the abundance of timber is more specifically attributed to “windfall trees from the hurricane of 1938.”⁷³ The allusion is to the Great Hurricane of 1938 that devastated New England, killing 564, injuring 1,700, and causing \$306 million dollars in damage.⁷⁴ The image of a man and young boy wending their way through the aftermath of a catastrophe is a common one in *The Road*, but in this scene it is presented in a starkly different context. McCarthy suggests that even in the most peaceful environments, destruction is an inextricable part of human experience.

The parallels between *The Road* and “Indian Camp” are much more profound than these two allusions suggest. Both works are about a father-son and son, and each portrays a child who is inadvertently exposed to grotesque violence and death too early in life. Near the beginning of the novel, the man warns his son, “you forget what you want to remember and you

remember what you want to forget” (12). This idea resonates in the Nick Adams stories as well; “Big Two-Hearted River” is in many ways about a man trying to replace horrific remembrances with new experiences. While it is arguable whether Dr. Adams is right to allow Nick to assist him with the operation, he distinctly attempts to keep his son from seeing the dead father, telling his brother George to “take Nick out of the shanty” once he discovers what happened.⁷⁵ *The Road* is replete with similar occurrences. Upon discovering a barn, the boy insists that they search it but the father abruptly says “let’s go” when he sees that there are “three bodies hanging from the rafters” (17). Passing burned “figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling,” the man tells his son to take his hand, adding, “I don’t think you should see this” (190). In what is the most tragic scene in *The Road*, the boy sees “a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening” on a spit before his father is able to intervene. The man responds with love and sadness: “He bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him, holding him close. I’m sorry, he whispered. I’m sorry” (198). The man’s apology is not an acknowledgement of his failure as a parent but a lamentation about the state of their world.

The ending of *The Road* does not imply that there is a possible means of redemption for the planet, at least not in a material sense. The boy’s innocence and empathic nature are apparent, but he is not a messianic figure. Children have become food for many people, so the perpetuation of the human race is unlikely. On the other hand, father and son carry “the fire,” a spirit of hope and power allusive to the Pentecostal flame described in chapter two of the Book of Acts. In an image eerily similar to that of the “long of shear of light,” Luke describes how the Holy Spirit descends upon the apostles in “tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.” In *The Road*, “Carrying the fire” is not an explicit state of goodness, however, and brings with it implications of violence. Fire has destroyed the earth, but it is also a source of light

and refinement. The Christic implications of “shining in the darkness” speak to the way the boy is characterized, but the father in the end represents the destructive impulses of fire. While his inevitable death is tragic, he must die because his “original sin” is his complicity, direct or indirect, in the destruction of the world. He does not conform to the ways of his son, choosing instead to apply the same logic that led to the demise of his civilization. Near the end of the novel, an amputee steals most of the man and boy’s belongings. After catching up to him, Papa orders the perpetrator to strip himself naked and give them his clothes. Boy and criminal plead for mercy, a subtle reference to the pardon Christ offers to the repentant thief crucified next to him, but the man exercises retaliatory justice, responding, “you didnt mind doing it to us” (257).⁷⁶ The implication is that the man is irreversibly part of a cycle of behavior that only the boy may be able to defy.

The final sequence of events suggests a further cyclicity and reflects the Minimalistic tendency of investing profound meaning in common objects. Three days after the man’s death, the boy is “rescued” by another family. The boy is approached by a man wearing a “yellow ski parka” and carrying a shotgun along with a “bandolier filled with shells,” an image of plenty given the dearth of ammunition. He is a “veteran of old skirmishes,” scarred, bearded, and with “one eye wandering” (282-83). While there is an element of relief in knowing that the child is being adopted by a man who is experienced and well-armed, there is nothing to suggest that he is someone who will help the boy bring about a spiritual or moral renaissance. If there is anything redemptive about the man, it is the fact that he has a son and daughter (284). McCarthy suggests that any future for humanity rests upon children who see the world in a way radically different from the corrupted vision of their war-ravaged parents.

The fragmentary, episodic structure of *The Road* reflects the fading vision of a failed civilization. In other words, the subject matter matches well with McCarthy's Minimalistic style. The reduction of language is a symptom of a dying world, one that the boy and his young cohorts will have to re-imagine and rebuild, and yet the lessons of the father imply that there is something useful in the ruins. *The Road* itself is the product of a tested but enduring literary tradition. McCarthy omits important information but implies what is missing, submerging facts that are essential to understanding the ethical ramifications of the man's actions. The novel is a testament to the author's axiom that "books are made out of books," and despite its efficiency generates considerable depth. Through allusions to The Book of Genesis and the short stories of Ernest Hemingway, McCarthy develops a thematic kinship with works that are an indelible part of the Western canon. In spare but vibrant prose, McCarthy illustrates a principle that Hemingway's work often examines: even in the face of certain defeat, there is reason to continue. Abraham's trials suggest that the reason is not always, or perhaps never, well-defined but there is virtue in continuity. Although McCarthy does not offer assurances or certainty, the ending of *The Road* implies that even in the wake of catastrophe, love and hope endure.

A similar message can be derived from Cisneros's *Caramelo*. Lala's love for her father withstands metaphorical ruination, requiring her to forgive Inocencio for what has done in the past and care for him in her present. The Reyes family respects their history and memories, but in the end such things cannot dictate how they think and feel about one another. After his own father has passed away, the young boy in *The Road* must honor the elder man's legacy yet at the same time find purpose in the absence of structure and civilization. Both works suggest that crossing borders, coping with the emotional weight of undergoing major transitions, is both perilous and necessary.

McCarthy and Cisneros demonstrate remarkable stylistic control in conveying these central concepts, successfully matching theme with technique. Like their American Minimalist predecessors, they demonstrate a devotion to craft and precision. Despite their significant differences in setting and plot, *Caramelo* and *The Road* are essentially a celebration of the breadth and aesthetic pleasure of language. The joyless physical environment found in *The Road* is ameliorated by McCarthy's extensive vocabulary and poetic rhythms. Although they are often difficult to find, words essentially mitigate the effects of the inexorable, memory-destroying darkness. Lala Reyes is also engaged in an act of preservation; her narration is a memorial to her father and, more broadly, her family. Because she speaks with style and enthusiasm, the act of storytelling is both therapeutic and satisfying.

Notes

¹ When asked how long it took her to write the novel, Cisneros often responded to interviewers that it took nine years. In an interview for an article that appeared in *The Oregonian*, however, she said, “ ‘I just found some tapes of my father talking from 1988, so the concept was around a lot longer, I guess’ .” Jeff Baker, “Journey Through the Heart,” *The Oregonian* (Oct. 5, 2003): E7.

² Renee H. Shea, “Truth, Lies, and Memory: A Profile of Sandra Cisneros,” *Poets & Writers* 30, no. 5 (2002): 35-36.

³ During an interview with Gayle Elliot, Cisneros was asked, “Do you classify yourself in a particular way: minimalist, magical realist, postmodernist? It would seem to me that you classify yourself maybe more as a storyteller.” Cisneros responded, “I don’t classify myself as any of those things because I don’t know what that means, and I don’t have to know. It’s not my job to be classifying my stories.” Gayle Elliott, “An Interview with Sandra Cisneros,” *The Missouri Review* 25, no. 1 (2002): 98.

⁴ Jeff Guinn, “Self-Possession,” *St. Paul Pioneer-Press* (Sep. 22, 2002): 10E.

⁵ Baker, “Journey Through the Heart,” p. E8.

⁶ For example, “Dirt” was published in 1996 in *Grand Street*. Several paragraphs were added to create the version that appears in *Caramelo*, most of which involve Zoila Reyes and Awful Grandmother. Other changes, such as the switch from “Vienna hot-dog stand” to “Jim’s Original Hot Dogs,” seem motivated by Cisneros’s desire for historical and geographical accuracy. See “Dirt,” *Grand Street* 57 (Summer 1996): 122-25, and “Dirt,” *Caramelo* (New York: Knopf, 2002), pp. 294-98.

⁷ Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo* (New York: Knopf, 2002), p. 56. All subsequent references are to the same edition.

⁸ “Betsy Kline, “Cisneros Stirs Up a Spanish Treat,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Oct. 27, 2002): F3.

⁹ Keir Graff, review of *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros, *Booklist* 98 (Aug. 1, 2002): 1883, Adriana Lopez, “Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo*: Caramel-Colored Prose,” *Library Journal* 127, no. 15 (2002): 90.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Johnston, “Family Stories, Healthy Lies,” *Toronto Star* (Jan. 12, 2003): D14. Johnston apparently did not know that Cisneros had published parts of *Caramelo* as stand-alone stories before including them in the novel.

¹¹ Ana Lopez, “Book World Raves: *Caramelo* or *Puro Cuento*,” *Washington Post Book World* (Dec. 1, 2002), p. 4.

¹² Juanita Heredia, “Voyages South and North: The Politics of Transnational Gender Identity in *Caramelo* and *American Chica*,” *Latino Studies* 5, no. 3 (2007): 349.

¹³ Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, “Sandra Cisneros and Her Trade of the Free World,” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 60, no. 2 (2006): 23-36.

¹⁴ Heather Alumbaugh, “Narrative Coyotes: Migration and Narrative Voice in Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo*,” *MELUS* 35, no. 1 (2010): 53-75, James Phelan, “Rhetoric, Politics, and Ethics in Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo*,” *What Democracy Looks Like: New Critical Realism for a Post-Seattle World*, ed. Amy Schrager Lang and Cecelia Tichi (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), pp. 114-22, and José Garcia Vizcaíno, “Voices, Discourse and Identity in Chicano Narrative,” *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 23 (2006): 95-103.

¹⁵ See, for example, the note on p. 123 of *Caramelo*.

¹⁶ Jessica Magnani, *Divided Loyalties: Latina Family Sagas and National Romances*, Ph. D. dissertation, University of Florida, 2007, p. 146.

¹⁷ Robert Birnbaum, "Sandra Cisneros: Author of *Caramelo* Talks with Robert Birnbaum." *Identity Theory*. Web-based journal.
<<http://www.identitytheory.com/people/birnbaum76.html>>. Accessed April 8, 2010, 12:44 A. M.

¹⁸ Ed Morales, "Imaginary Homeland," *Críticas* 2, no. 5 (September/October, 2002): 29.

¹⁹ Margaria Fichtner, "Mouth of the Border," *The Miami Herald* (Nov. 17, 2002): 12M.

²⁰ Robert Birnbaum, "Sandra Cisneros," *Identity Theory*, web-based journal, Teresa K. Weaver, "Zen Informs Latina Novelist's Work," *Atlanta Constitution* (November 22, 2002): E7. Cisneros's mention of *Dreamtigers* suggests that she was referring to a translation of Borges's *El Hacedor* (1960), or *The Maker*, completed by Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland. "Dreamtigers" is the name of a piece in the collection. Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers*, trans. Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970).

²¹ Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 11.

²² Galeano, "Christmas Eve," *The Book of Embraces*, p. 72.

²³ Birnbaum, "Sandra Cisneros," web-based journal,
<<http://www.identitytheory.com/people/birnbaum76.html>>.

²⁴ Cisneros was familiar with the form. In an interview with Robert Birnbaum, she talked about the work of Brazilian author Clarice Lispector. Birnbaum, "Sandra Cisneros,"
<<http://www.identitytheory.com/people/birnbaum76.html>>.

²⁵ Giovanni Pontiero, Preface, *Selected Crônicas* by Clarice Lispector, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. vii.

²⁶ Clarice Lispector, *Selected Crônicas*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 72.

²⁷ Ray Suarez, "Conversation: Cisneros," Transcript from *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, Oct. 15, 2002, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/conversation/july-dec02/cisneros_10-15.html> Accessed April 9, 2010, 12:27 A. M.

²⁸ Borges, "The Witness," *Dreamtigers*, p. 39.

²⁹ Shea, "Truth, Lies, and Memory," p. 33.

³⁰ Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L. Flora, "The Fotonovela As a Tool for Class and Cultural Domination," *Latin American Perspectives* 5, no. 1, Culture in the Age of Mass Media (Winter, 1978): 135.

³¹ For in-depth discussions of *telenovelas* and Latino culture, see O. Hugo Benavides, *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), Vivian Barrera and Denise D. Bielby, "Place, Faces, and Other Familiar Things: The Cultural Experience of Telenovela Viewing Among Latinos in the United States," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, no. 4 (2001): 1-18, and Jorge González, "Understanding Telenovelas as a Cultural Front: A Complex Analysis of a Complex Reality," *Telenovelas*, ed. Ilan Stavans (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010), pp. 68-78.

³² González, "Understanding Telenovelas," pp. 68-69.

³³ Benavides, *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas*, p. 34.

³⁴ Morales, "Imaginary Homeland," p. 32.

³⁵ Annette Sandoval, *The Directory of Saints* (Signet: New York, 1997), p. 238.

³⁶ Stefano Brufani, *Saint Anthony of Padua*, trans. Richard Pierce (Milan: Skira, 2008), p. 14.

³⁷ Fritz Lanham, "Cisneros on Writing and Herself," *Texas: Houston Chronicle Magazine* (Oct. 6, 2002): 8.

³⁸ Cisneros's note about the origins of the *rebozo* speaks to its cultural plurality:

The rebozo was born in Mexico, but like all mestizos, it came from everywhere. It evolved from the cloths Indian women used to carry their babies, borrowed its knotted fringe from Spanish shawls, and was influenced by the silk embroideries from the imperial court of China exported to Manila, then Acapulco, via the Spanish galleons. During the colonial period, mestizo women were prohibited by statutes dictated by the Spanish Crown to dress like Indians, and since they had no means to buy clothing like the Spaniards', they began to weave cloth on the indigenous looms creating a long and narrow shawl that slowly was shaped by foreign influences. The quintessential Mexican rebozo is the rebozo de bolita, whose spotted design imitates a snakeskin, an animal venerated by the Indians in pre-Columbian times (96).

³⁹ Roberto Alifano, William Barnstone, Jorge Luis Borges, and Nicomedes Suárez-Aráuz, "Jorge Luis Borges: Interview," *The Massachusetts Review* 24 (Autumn, 1983): 514.

⁴⁰ Cormac McCarthy, Interview with Oprah Winfrey, "Oprah's Exclusive Interview with Cormac McCarthy Video," Oprah's Book Club, added July 8, 2008, <<http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/Oprahs-Exclusive-Interview-with-Cormac-McCarthy-Video>>, accessed August 3, 2010, 3:38 P. M. *The Road* is dedicated to John McCarthy, eight years-old when the book was published in 2006.

⁴¹ In her analysis of the stylistic difference between *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*, Ashley Kunsu maintained that

in *Blood Meridian* “War is god” (249), linguistically and metaphysically. The novel “sings hymns of violence” in prose often allusive and baroque to the breaking point, prose frequently likened to that of William Faulkner. The style of *The Road*, on the contrary, is pared down, elemental, a triumph over the dead echoes of the abyss and, alternately, over relentless ironic gesturing.

Kunsa’s description of McCarthy’s prose works equally well as a description of Minimalistic style. Kunsa, “ ‘Maps of the World in Its Becoming’: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 1 (Fall, 2009): 58.

⁴² Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 26. All subsequent references are to the same edition.

⁴³ For a detailed examination of the geography of *The Road*, see Wesley G. Morgan, “The Route and Roots of *The Road*,” *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (Autumn 2008): 39-47.

⁴⁴ Laura Philpot Benedict, “‘The Road’: A Post-Apocalyptic Masterpiece: Cormac McCarthy’s Father-Son Road Trip by Turns Grim and Tender,” *Grand Rapids Press* (Oct. 22, 2006), p. J8.

⁴⁵ Cliff Froehlich, “Bleak Landscape, Spare Language Frame Survival Story,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Oct. 8, 2006), p. F9

⁴⁶ Kenneth Lincoln, *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 164.

⁴⁷ Mark Schechner, “McCarthy’s Latest Travels His Bleakest Terrain Yet,” *Buffalo News* (Oct. 8, 2006), p. G5

⁴⁸ Cormac McCarthy and Oprah Winfrey,
 <<http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/Oprahs-Exclusive-Interview-with-Cormac-McCarthy-Video>>. Accessed August 3, 2010, 3:38 P. M.

⁴⁹ See Cormac McCarthy, “The Road—1st Draft,” manuscripts, box 87, folder 6, leaves 74-80, 87, 141-153, Cormac McCarthy Papers, The Witliff Collections, Southwestern Writers Collection, Alkek Library, Texas State University—San Marcos, San Marcos, TX.

⁵⁰ The man’s lack of faith in God, coupled with his conclusion that Nature is indifferent, echoes the sentiment expressed in Stephen Crane’s “96” from the collection *War Is Kind*:

A man said to the universe:

“Sir, I exist!”

“However,” replied the universe,

“The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation.”

Crane, “96,” *The Portable Stephen Crane*, ed. Joseph Katz (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 548.

⁵¹ Cormac McCarthy, “The Road—1st Draft,” leaf 141. Words and phrases McCarthy wrote in the space above a completed sentence have been placed in double parentheses.

⁵² McCarthy, “The Road—1st Draft,” leaf 141. McCarthy moved the term “soundless” to the position marked with an asterisk.

⁵³ McCarthy, “The Road—1st Draft,” leaves 141-44, 146-49.

⁵⁴ Cormac McCarthy, “Road—Old 2nd Draft,” manuscripts, box 87, folder 7, p. 85, Cormac McCarthy Papers, The Witliff Collections, Southwestern Writers Collection, Alkek Library, Texas State University—San Marcos, San Marcos, TX.

⁵⁵ In *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, Steven Frye posited that

the overall style is minimalist and reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway, and McCarthy orchestrates an homage to his predecessor in a number of vivid allusions. As the third-person narrator recounts the father's memory of the boy's birth, the mother's pain and the father's response are rendered in detail: "Her cries meant nothing to him" (59). This is a line taken almost verbatim from Hemingway's "Indian Camp," as Nick Adams's father performs a cesarean section on an Indian woman while his son watches.

Frye's comment is insightful, but he is incorrect in his assertion that McCarthy has quoted Hemingway "almost verbatim." Dr. Adams tells Nick that " 'her screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important' " (16). The implications are similar, however, as both men are able to unemotionally focus on the task at hand because they are doctors. Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), p. 172, and Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time*, "Indian Camp" (New York: Scribner, 1925), p. 16.

⁵⁶ McCarthy, "The Road—1st Draft," leaf 5.

⁵⁷ Cormac McCarthy, "Old Road Notes," manuscripts, box 87, folder 3, leaf 36, Cormac McCarthy Papers, The Wittliff Collections, Southwestern Writers Collection, Alkek Library, Texas State University—San Marcos, San Marcos, TX.

⁵⁸ McCarthy, "The Road—1st Draft," leaf 54.

⁵⁹ Steven H. Miles, *The Hippocratic Oath and the Ethics of Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. xiv. Miles examines this part of the oath from a number of perspectives. He considers whether it is a vow against euthanasia, assisting in executions, or murder. Given the historical context of the Oath, he concludes that it is a promise not to kill or assist in plots to take another person's life (66-80).

⁶⁰ Richard B. Woodward, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," *New York Times Magazine* (Apr. 19, 1992), p. 30.

⁶¹ McCarthy, "The Road—1st Draft," leaf 51.

⁶² Johannes de Silentio (Søren Kierkegaard), "Fear and Trembling, Dialectical Lyric," *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 101.

⁶³ Genesis 19: 1-5.

⁶⁴ Tim Blackmore, "Life of War, Death of the Rest: The Shining Path of Cormac McCarthy's Thermonuclear America," *Bulletin of Science and Technology Society* 29, no. 19 (2009): 18.

⁶⁵ The massive amounts of ash and snow described in *The Road* could have been caused by either a comet-asteroid strike or "nuclear winter." For a thorough explanation of "dust theory," see John S. Lewis, *Rain of Iron and Ice: The Very Real Threat of Comet and Asteroid Bombardment* (New York: Perseus, 1997), pp. 91-99.

⁶⁶ McCarthy, "Old Road Notes," leaf 13.

⁶⁷ McCarthy, "Old Road Notes," leaf 14.

⁶⁸ Whether the war has anything to do with Nick's journey into the wilderness is a point of contention. For an excellent synopsis of the debate, see George Monteiro, "By the Book: 'Big Two-Hearted River' and Izaak Walton," *Ernest Hemingway: The Oak Park Legacy*, ed. James Nagel (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996), pp. 145-61.

⁶⁹ Ernest Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River: Part I," *In Our Time* (New York: Scribner, 1925), p. 133.

- ⁷⁰ Thomas H. Schaub, "Secular Scripture and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Renascence* 61, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 156.
- ⁷¹ Hemingway, "River: Part I," p. 138.
- ⁷² Hemingway, "Indian Camp," p. 19.
- ⁷³ McCarthy, "Old Road Notes," leaf 24.
- ⁷⁴ Anonymous, "By the Numbers: New England: September 21, 2008, Marks the 70th Anniversary of the Great Hurricane of 1938," *Yankee* 72, no. 5 (Sep./Oct., 2008): 34. An Associated Press article printed on September 22, 1938 details the breadth of the destruction, reporting damage from Vermont, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. See "Storm Batters All New England; Providence Hit by Tidal Wave," *New York Times* (Sept. 22, 1938), pp. 1, 18.
- ⁷⁵ Hemingway, "Indian Camp," p. 18.
- ⁷⁶ Luke 23:39-43.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Despite being scattered among eleven decades, American Minimalists share a common aesthetic. Their work does not suggest that they were enamored with the idea that “less is more” but that it is possible to write compact prose that achieves depth of setting, characterization, and plot without including long passages of exposition. Like the haiku poets who stand among their influences, they draw attention to their art rather than themselves. In other words, precision and craftsmanship transcend the allure of egoism. Writers working within the tradition did not invent new techniques but rather used a unique combination of storytelling methods to an extreme degree. When stylistically successful, their stories, poems, and novels evoke intellectual and emotive richness.

The effectiveness of a Minimalist story depends upon the successful use of three central techniques: allusion, implication, and efficiency. In order to create fiction that achieves thematic and linguistic gravity, authors working within the mode are economical in their use of language. Every word matters. The images they render are consequential; details about setting often serve as objective or imagistic correlatives. Because of these characteristics, the fiction often has the compression of poetry but the structure of prose.

Even though they have much in common stylistically, Minimalist writers do not share a unified philosophy, perhaps because they do not form a school in the sense that they all knew

one another, gathered, and produced a manifesto. They generally do not place their characters in the midst of ethical crises or use their fiction to level social criticism. The Imagist credo written by Ezra Pound, then expanded upon by Richard Aldington and Amy Lowell, is the nearest thing to a formal set of rules for the movement, and it deals strictly with technique. In a broad manner, those who participated in the movement reacted against what they perceived to be excesses in literature, such as the flowery abstractions of British Romanticism and the assertive, moralizing narrators common in Victorian novels. The progenitors of the tradition, Pound, Lowell, and Ernest Hemingway, are united by a common adherence to imagistic precision. All were dedicated to craft, to creating art that matched the intensity of their aesthetic vision.

The tenets that govern the Minimalist aesthetic developed over the course of the twentieth century; they were certainly not “new” in the 1980s. Neglecting to acknowledge the line of influence that extends from Lowell to Cormac McCarthy and beyond, critics such as Madison Smartt Bell, John W. Aldridge, and Richard Ford dismissed the mode as a fad or superficial “tag.” The style is not, however, so historically narrow. It began in earnest with a group of writers who called themselves *Imagistes*, most of whom lived in England during the first decade of the twentieth century, an assemblage inspired by the aesthetic philosophies of Asian poets and T. E. Hulme. In what was an important departure from the dominance of verse forms, two members of the tradition, Lowell and John Gould Fletcher, began to experiment with a hybrid form they called Polyphonic Prose. As the twentieth century progressed, writers such as Hemingway began to explore and adapt what proved to be a versatile category.

The Polyphonic Prose pieces that comprise Lowell’s *Can Grande’s Castle* play heavily upon the intellect, perhaps attributable to the fact that they were almost exclusively assembled from information found in books. Drawing from the Imagist tradition of which she was an

important part, Lowell wrote lengthy prose-poems that derive much of their depth from the use of allusion. Like all Minimalist authors, she implicitly demands that her audience either knows, or is willing to learn, about the places and events she writes about. “Sea-Blue and Blood-Red,” for example, cannot be fully understood if it is not read in the context of Lord Nelson’s major naval victories and the letters that ultimately revealed his affair with Lady Emma Hamilton. Lowell chose emotionally charged events to serve as the basis for her fiction. She displays the strength of her imagination by rendering events such as the Battle of the Nile in vibrant, sensorial details.

Lowell’s depictions of battle, her attention to the colors and sensations evoked by explosions and the position of the light, illustrates the connection between Literary Impressionism and Minimalism. Writers such as Stephen Crane and Anton Chekhov, authors who were part of the former tradition, did not place a particular emphasis upon sparse language but tended to depict synesthetic scenes focused upon experiential moments rather than convey their figures’ contemplation of complex ideas. Scenes that involve motion and volatile emotions, which dominate works such as Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, Lowell’s *Can Grande’s Castle*, and Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, are particularly suitable material for both movements. “Hedge Island,” for example, portrays the bustle of a cobblestoned London yard before and during the launch of the mail coaches. Lowell’s speaker expectantly observes the

great gold-starred coaches, blazing with royal insignia, waiting in line at the Post-Office. Eight of a summer’s evening, and the sun only just gone down. “Lincoln,” “Winchester,” “Portsmouth,” shouted from the Post-Office Steps; and the Portsmouth chestnuts come up to the collar with a jolt, and stop again, dancing as the bags are hoisted up.¹

The passage is replete with potential energy. The narrator describes moments of preparation, actions that will ultimately fuel a shift into chaotic activity. Transitioning from images of quiet yet charged anticipation, the pent up aggression of the horses is released as “they part and pull, push each other sideways, sprawl on the slippery pavement, and gather wave-like and crashing to a leap.”² The scene is rife with visual and auditory stimulation. Lowell bolsters the sensorial effect through the pacing of her language; the use of alliteration in the opening of the sentence sonically matches the jaunting, disconnected motion of the animals as they spring to life.

Despite their many similarities in technique and subject matter, Lowell’s prose-poetry reflects a linguistic playfulness that rarely appears in Hemingway’s fiction. In fact, the musicality and breadth of Lowell’s diction did not reemerge in Minimalistic writing until Sandra Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street* and *Caramelo*. In “Those Who Don’t,” for example, Cisneros strings together sentences and phrases more reminiscent of Lowell than Hemingway: “All brown around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes.”³ Perhaps the greatest variance among authors in the category is the degree to which they employ terse, spare language. Hemingway was trained as a journalist and instructed by Pound to “keep the language efficient,” an axiom that does not seem to have been of absolute import to Lowell and Cisneros. This is not to say, however, that their narratives reach the verbal effluence of works by authors such as Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace. Despite minor disparities in economy, all of the authors within the mode adhered to the central tendencies of efficiency, allusiveness, and suggestiveness. Hemingway seems to have been familiar with Lowell’s Imagist axiom that writers employ “suggestion—the implying of

something rather than the stating of it, implying it perhaps under a metaphor, perhaps in an even less obvious way.”⁴ His Iceberg Theory is founded on the same principle.

For his use of implicative language, precisely rendered images, and meaningful allusions, Hemingway stands as the prototypical Minimalist author. The influence of Pound and Lowell is perhaps best illustrated in the brief, poetic montages that form the interchapters of *In Our Time*. Chapter III, one of two pieces that deal with the World War I battle at Mons, is technically similar to Lowell’s imagistic scenes. In a reportorial, emotionless tone reminiscent of disinterested journalism, the first-person narrator remembers that

we were in a garden at Mons. Young Buckley came in with his patrol from across the river. The first German I saw climbed up over the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him. He had so much equipment on and looked awfully surprised and fell down into the garden. Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that.⁵

While the subject matter dealt with in this passage differs greatly from Lowell’s description of the carriages in the Post-Office yard, there are several stylistic similarities. The setting is a confined yet serene space in a concrete, geographically real place. The early motion is calm and preparatory. The action slowly accelerates, beginning with a visual sensation: “The first German I saw climbed up over the garden wall.” Although it is understated and seemingly orderly, the implication is that the scene grows increasingly chaotic as the violence escalates. One soldier came over the wall and then three more, and Hemingway implies that the cracking of the rifles and the shouting of men builds as the speed of the attack increases. Serenity gives way to raw power and brutality.

The control Hemingway displays in constructing a compressed yet volatile image corresponds with his carefully placed allusion to Mons. The subject matter is meaningful, not arbitrary. Through one simple detail, Hemingway adds remarkable depth to the vignette. Rather than being an abstract yet subtle commentary about how combat can deaden the emotions, Chapter III takes on a number of important and historical associations. Mons is viewed by the British to have been a general victory, a sound operation at the beginning of what turned out to be a disastrous war.⁶ Hemingway did not take part in that particular campaign, but he was friends with a man who did: Edward E. “Chink” Dorman-Smith.⁷ Like Lowell, Hemingway depended upon books, news stories, and verbal accounts, along with his own experiences, when he composed his fiction. The intellectual core of many Minimalist pieces is derived from a variety of historical and contemporary sources, which is often why they are heavily allusive.

The depth found in the best Minimalist works is in part attributable to the fact that authors in the tradition embrace the idea that, in McCarthy’s words, “books are made out of books.”⁸ In a broader sense, writers within the mode exploit multiple facets of culture without regard for what is considered “low-brow” and “high-brow.” If T. S. Eliot, Pound, and the other “high Modernists” wanted to ensure that literature needed to be studied in the classroom in order to be understood, then the writers of austere fiction were in many ways their opposites. The writing of McCarthy and Cisneros suggests that references to popular drinks, advertisements, and department stores, as well as other literary works, elicit emotional responses and are an indelible part of everyday life. Ann-Marie Karlsson missed this fundamental point, arguing that “in the new fiction . . . the overwhelming profusion of details, objects [sic] and brand-names does not deepen our knowledge or understanding of characters or plot. Despite their prominent presence these details do not communicate but conversely display uncommunicativeness.”⁹ On the

contrary, a well-placed reference enhances the overall efficiency of a piece, effectively achieving a contextually relevant, poetic depth. In a paratactic passage in *The Road*, McCarthy's narrator spots a barn with the words "See Rock City" written "across the roofslope," a detail that could easily be dismissed.¹⁰ However, it is an important geographical indicator that implies that the father and son are traveling through the American southeast, at that moment somewhere in the vicinity of Chattanooga, Tennessee.¹¹ Perhaps it would have been simpler if McCarthy had directly identified where the man and his child were headed, or at least where they begin, but it would allow for a lesser degree of engagement from his audience. Similarly, Cisneros's allusions to specific drinks and candies in *Caramelo* add a synesthetic element, accentuating the physical and sensorial differences that occur when crossing various types of borders.

Even though he is primarily responsible for reviving the style during the 1970s and 1980s, Raymond Carver is something of an anomaly among the Minimalists because he seldom refers to actual places or cultural artifacts. His tendency was to rely more heavily on suggestive language and omission than allusion when developing setting and characterization. The subtle narrative style used in "Cathedral," for example, suggests that the protagonist-narrator has experienced a profound change in attitude since Robert's visit. Hemingway wrote a number of first-person retrospective narrations, the Mons interchapters in *In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *A Farewell to Arms* among them, and an interpretation of each demands consideration of the speaker's temporal point of view. Carver uses this same approach in "Cathedral." During the course of the telling, the main character does not admit that he has changed, but he demonstrates the shift in his perspective towards Robert when he says "I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me."¹² The subtle implication is that each of his objections has been quelled by the epiphanic, highly sensorial moment he shares with Robert at

the end. Using the same kinetic, Impressionistic language found in Lowell and Hemingway's fiction, the protagonist describes that he "put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses. I hung great doors. I couldn't stop."¹³ The pacing of his language increases, suggesting that he is re-living an intense experience. He is unable in the end, however, to articulate a lesson learned. The moment was far too complex emotionally, and he understands what happened in only an abstract sense.

All of the stories in *Cathedral* examine a form of figurative blindness, and Carver's characters commonly struggle with ineffability. Despite the fact that he often used dramatic irony, portraying figures who could not see their lack of comprehension even though an outside observer might be able to, Carver insisted that he did not feel he was holding his characters up for examination.¹⁴ Carver's position is sincere, but he seems to either miss or ignore the fact that many of his protagonists experience growth because of an expansion in vision. Authors within the tradition commonly depict characters in similar situations, but Carver is right in the sense that it is not so that they can be analyzed and judged as part of a broader critique of societal ills.

Minimalist authors frequently employ irony in their fiction, perhaps attributable to the legacy of Crane and other Impressionists, but it seldom communicates a condemnatory tone. In Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, for example, the protagonist's mother, Mary, hypocritically declares that she will "fergive" Maggie for becoming a prostitute after the young girl has been murdered. She chooses that occupation because her family cruelly rejects her after Maggie is seduced by Pete.¹⁵ Crane's depiction of Maggie's brutal, uncaring household calls attention to destructiveness of religious legalism and, more broadly, the spiritually corrosive effects of poverty. Because their work does not tend to resemble social commentary, rarely will characters such as Mary appear in a work by Hemingway, McCarthy, or Susan Minot. On the

contrary, writers in the mode often seem to have a profound respect for their figures.

Hemingway's Nick Adams, for example, is not portrayed as a fool or hypocrite. Nick is frequently confronted with situations that prove formative even though he is not intellectually or psychologically prepared to handle them: "Indian Camp" is a strong example. In the concluding scene, when Nick trails his hand in the water as he and his father move across the lake and feels "quite sure that he would never die," it is a stark adumbration of the violence he is yet to experience.¹⁶ The irony is that he has no idea how much he will suffer in the future, how close he will come to death as he sits against a church with a wound to his spine.¹⁷ He does not yet comprehend mortality, and it is understandable given what he saw at the Indian camp. The inclusion of the "Three Shots" material, in which Uncle George calls his nephew a "coward" and a "liar," would have brought a condemnatory atmosphere to the tale.¹⁸ Because Hemingway excised George's pejorative assumptions about Nick, the writer and his audience do not have a conspiratorial relationship that necessitates judgment.

The lack of cutting irony in Minimalist fiction is perhaps attributable to two different things. First, many of the best works in the tradition are heavily autobiographical. For Hemingway to write something that made Nick Adams look foolish or hypocritical would have, on some level, meant casting aspersions upon himself. Hemingway is not Adams, but, as the many biographies about the author attest to, the latter is loosely based on the former. Carver wrote about the people he knew and he said they were familiar to him because he was one of them. "Cathedral" is an autobiographical tale, but it has a moment of insight that in the end reflects well on the nameless central figure. He learns from the experience and, to an extent, sheds his blindness. Jay McInerney comes close to open disparagement of his biographically-based main character in *Bright Lights, Big City*. The nameless speaker shamelessly snorts

cocaine, plays a dangerous prank on his former boss by releasing an angry ferret inside her office after she fires him, and subtly contemplates suicide in the wake of his divorce. Like the protagonist in “Cathedral,” McInerney’s central figure is in many ways repulsive. However, he is ultimately redeemed by an epiphanic moment. He humbles himself in the end, admitting that he must “learn everything all over again.”¹⁹ Achieving a modicum of self-awareness, he demonstrates that he is capable of change. Rather than being a person who should be condemned for his self-destructive actions, he shows himself worthy of empathy.

While the ending of *Bright Lights* suggests the possibility of redemption, it is not in any way didactic. The second reason for the lack of critical irony is that it is a device often used as a means to teach a lesson, to instruct readers not to act in a certain way. Minimalist authors are far more subtle in their attempts to educate, although they seldom seem to try. Gus Vincent, the alcoholic father in *Monkeys*, could easily have become a caricature, a “cautionary tale,” or an object of ridicule. While the narrators in *Monkeys* do not excuse the father’s actions, they tend to give him a voice and a perspective. In the end, it is telling that he is given the opportunity to provide a hopeful sentiment during the boat-ride home from the ash-scattering ceremony, affirming that he knows that “it will get nice” in the future.²⁰ Gus is a destructive force in most of the narratives, but Minot’s narrators show rather than tell how his problems generate and perpetuate the various interpersonal fissures that divide the family. One of the central implications in *Monkeys* is that no experience can be explained in simple terms. As is also the case in many Impressionist works, human existence proves too complex to be reduced to unsophisticated ethical axioms.

Minot and McInerney’s use of Impressionistic techniques also involves stringing together sensorial montages, brief moments in time that emphasize experience over intellectual

contemplation. Lowell and Hemingway do this in their combat narratives, but it works equally well in depictions of domestic scenarios energized by suppressed emotional tension.

McInerney's *Bright Lights* is, among other things, a novel about impulse and narcissism. The narrator's self-destructive impulses, his inability to cope with the death of his innermost personal ambitions, drives him to self-medicate with drugs and club-life. He also surrounds himself with people who enable his behavior. In sparse, direct terms, the narrator describes how the self-absorbed Tad Allagash "goes over to the mahogany-and-gilt framed mirror that you inherited from your grandmother, the one Amanda was so afraid your cousin was going to nab. He runs his tongue over the glass."²¹ He does this, in part, because he thinks there is cocaine in the dust floating around the protagonist's apartment. The implications of the scene, however, are more complex. As Carver so often does, McInerney inserts a mundane object into a situation and imbues it with emotional significance. The mirror awakens the speaker's memory of his grandmother, a member of his family and thus a part of the past he attempts to bury within himself. He then remembers that his estranged wife prized the item and is therefore reminded of one of the women that has caused him pain. The final image, Tad licking a reflection of himself, is a gross act of self-indulgence that implies that the person he cares about most is himself. In addition, it is a repudiation of the narrator's refusal to forget the past and live in the moment, a brazen act of indirect disrespect. In Tad's code of conduct, over-stimulation of the senses is an acceptable way to form a protective barrier against any discomforting contemplation of reality.

The emphasis upon the senses in Minimalist fiction suggests that immediate experience is more pressing than the need to contemplate the past. The implication is that memories, in order to be understood, must be intellectually synthesized before they have meaning. This is not to say that characters in the fiction of McInerney, Carver, and Hemingway are incapable of complex

thought but that they are more interested in “living in the moment.” A figure’s desire to focus on the present rather than the past often has profound psychological ramifications. In Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, characters such as the protagonist in “On the Quai at Smyrna” and Nick Adams in “Big Two-Hearted River” have not yet come to terms emotionally with their personal histories. The narrator is a conduit rather than an interpreter, making no attempt to mediate in the relationship between character and listener.

Despite the fact that there is an aesthetic reason for emphasizing sensory experience over synthesis, the reticence of narrators and protagonists, their lack of philosophizing, is often misattributed to a dearth of intelligence on the part of the author. Minimalists have often been undeservedly attacked as anti-intellectual. Pound condescendingly referred to Lowell as a “hippopoetess” and founder of “Amygism,” a moniker in part driven by his perception of her as overly hasty with her work.²² In 1934, polymath Wyndham Lewis wrote a disparaging piece on Hemingway entitled “The Dumb Ox: A Study of Ernest Hemingway.” Lewis could not dispute the craftsmanship of Hemingway’s writing but complained that he was figuratively “*submerged*” when it came to the pressing social matters of the day:

But *political significance*! That is surely the last thing one would expect to find in such books as “In Our Time,” “The Sun also Rises,” “Men Without Women,” or “Farewell to Arms.” And indeed it is difficult to imagine a writer whose mind is more entirely closed to politics than is Hemingway’s. I do not suppose he has ever heard of the Five-Year Plan, though I dare say he knows that artists pay no income tax in Mexico, and is quite likely to be following closely the agitation of the Mexican matadors to get themselves recognized as “artists” so that they may pay no income tax. I expect he has heard of Hitler, but thinks of him mainly, if he

is acquainted with the story, as the Boche who went down into a cellar with another Boche and captured thirty Frogs and came back with an Iron Cross.²³

Hemingway was seldom politically inclined, although he did participate in the production of Joris Ivens's film *The Spanish Earth* in 1937 and write *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1940, works relevant to the Spanish Civil War.²⁴ Regardless, Lewis's assertions lack merit. Hemingway addressed major themes such as death and love, ideas that inform and transcend the machinations of government and nationalism.

After the advent of the grandiose, self-reflexive literature of the 1960s and 1970s written by authors such as Pynchon and Vladimir Nabokov, the accusations of superficiality continued. In addressing a question of whether his fiction reflects a broad sense of disengagement, Frederick Barthelme said in an interview that

I don't like being called a minimalist, which I am called I think because my characters don't get up on boxes and shout out their views of the world. This is not because they do not have views of the world, but rather that they recognize that we make views of the world the same way we make cars—we produce a great many, but they're not very reliable. So the characters shut up. This pleases me.²⁵

Barthelme's position suggests a postmodern apathy that does not universally apply to all authors working within the tradition. His comments indicate that attempting to examine meaningful content is in effect pointless because the objective has been superseded by the subjective. If anything, the work of later Minimalist authors such as Cisneros and McCarthy indicates that stylistic austerity does not diminish the power of precise images and major themes. In other words, there is nothing small or uniform about their ideas.

Minimalism is stylistically homogenous, but the subjects authors within the tradition write about cannot be generalized. This fact has not stopped some critics from trying. In the introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 1988*, Mark Helprin wrote a lengthy diatribe, asking

why are so many minimalist stories about despicable people in filthy unkempt garden apartments filled with ugly bric-a-brac, where everyone smokes, drinks, stays up all night, and is addicted to coffee? Why are the characters almost uniformly pudgy, stiff, and out of shape, even if they are in their twenties? Why do they watch so much television? Why do they have so many headaches? Why are they impotent, frigid, promiscuous, or all three combined? Why are their lives intertwined inextricably with brand names? Why are almost all of them divorced, never married, or, if married, remembering, having, or about to have an affair? Why is their hair dirty? Why don't they work at a profession or a trade? What are they doing in university towns in their middle age? Why do they seem to exist as if there were no landscape, or as if they were living in tunnels under ground?²⁶

Helprin continues on with more absurd rhetorical questions, all of which are ultimately irrelevant. Read in the context of the works of Lowell, Hemingway, Cisneros, and Minot, none of which involve headaches or tunnels, Helprin's list of queries seems ridiculous. No topic, theme, or character type is endemic to the mode. Settings and character types differ greatly, and the idea that works within the mode tend to feature blue-collar workers who do little more than shop at the local K-Mart is pure myth. Minot and Carver wrote tales using remarkably similar styles yet dealt with families and individuals from diverse backgrounds. The fact that term "dirty realism" originated in England suggests that America's reputation as a hard-working, no-frills

society somehow trumped the actual content of the fiction when considered from abroad. Robert Rebein maintained that the title was motivated by marketing demands, that “for the British, in short, dirty realism was a kind of truncated documentary naturalism that told the ‘truth’ about America in the 1980s, even as imported television shows such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* traded in ‘lies’.”²⁷ Many Americans seem to have adopted a similarly benighted view of austere fiction.

While the “real” America may not reside in the fictitious worlds of soap operas and dramas, it is indisputable that melodrama is an important, and appealing, genre in North and South American countries. In *Caramelo*, Cisneros embraces television and popular culture, perhaps more than any Minimalist who preceded her. Inocencio Reyes’s love of *fotonovelas* such as “*Don’t Make Me Commit a Craziiness*” and “*The Woman With Whom He Had Relations*”²⁸ subtly reflects the various complexities and entanglements that mar his family life. Although he fathered a child and concealed the fact from his wife for a number of years, an act attributable more to experiential pleasure than to a careful consideration of the potential consequences, the delight he takes in reading what are essentially soap operas in comic book form is oddly charming. Like Minot, Cisneros artfully portrays the beauty of “little moments,” the minor daily rituals that are for so many of their characters a source of sustenance. Cisneros demonstrates that popular culture is not necessarily mindless. In fact, it is the vehicle she uses to communicate one of her central themes: every person is worth memorializing.

Cisneros’s *Caramelo* is a somewhat unusual example of Minimalism, however, because it is not austere in terms of setting and characterization. Some passages border on sensory overload, such as when Lala recounts objects and events that appealed to her in Mexico: “Fireworks displays, *piñata* makers, palm weavers. Pens,—Five different styles, they cost us a lot! A restaurant called—His Majesty, the Taco. The napkins, little triangles of hard paper with

the name printed on one side.”²⁹ The rapidity of Lala’s thoughts reflects her active mind, a technique that Hemingway also uses in “Big Two-Hearted River” when Nick Adams sits inside his tent with nothing left to accomplish: “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.”³⁰ *Caramelo* is exceptional because the central techniques of the mode typically operate more effectively within sparse, or mundane, settings.

Lowell, Hemingway, and McCarthy, for example, present “waste land” motifs in their narratives. For Lowell and Hemingway, it is a logical choice because they were writing about the emotional and psychological “landscapes” of World War I. In capturing the zeitgeist, they created fiction that reflected the most rudimentary elements of daily life, and the implication of their work is that the search for a lost sense of purpose begins by appreciating simple things such as the beauty of an English mail coach or the scent of crushed sweet fern. The emotional frigidity of Hemingway’s speakers matches well with the declarative, reportorial style. McCarthy’s desolate, burned-out setting in *The Road* is also a world destroyed by combat, but the expansive vocabulary of his narrator operates as the last vestige of a dying civilization. McCarthy implies that even though “the names of things” are “slowly following those things into oblivion,” words themselves are one of the few aesthetic pleasures that can be preserved.³¹

McCarthy’s technical mastery in many ways bolsters the thematic depth of *The Road*. In some cases, however, authors achieve poor results because they attempt to use the central techniques of the mode to explore topics that lack sufficient depth. The sharpest criticism of Minimalism is often centered on a disdain for the superficial content of a specific work rather than the style itself. Rebein, for example, takes Amy Hempel to task for her tale “Tonight Is a Favor to Holly” not because it is technically unsound but because he does not care for the plot.

However, he does not adequately identify the actual problem. Focusing on the nebulous concept of “reader response,” Rebein opined that

what we are to make of all this is hard to say. Considerable energy has gone into creating a mood of impending doom, but other than the rather obvious idea that these women are waiting around for men and hate themselves for it, nothing much seems to be behind this mood. We know as little about the narrator at the story’s end as we did at the beginning. No explanation is offered for why these women live the way they do, why it’s so important for Holly that the narrator go on the blind date, what in their previous relationships has gone so wrong, or what, if anything, they intend to do about it. To be sure, we are given plenty of Hemingway’s tip of the iceberg, but by the time we finish the story we are far from believing that anything substantial remains below the surface.³²

Hempel is not, in other words, an ineffective practitioner of the mode. The problem is that she does not write about topics that interest Robert Rebein, a scholar who tellingly takes the liberty of speaking for a collective rather than himself alone. Detractors of the tradition often confuse matters of method with elements of taste. This is not criticism that should be dismissed, however. Writing stripped down fiction carries certain risks. If the themes developed do not match well with the efficiency of the language, a narrative will often lack weight. Authors in the mode are most successful when they write about death, initiation, love, and cultural identity. Hempel’s writing seems to evade these topics, or treat them with extreme subtlety. If she is to be derided, it is for mismatching subject and technique.

Hempel's fiction, and perhaps even Carver's to some extent, sometimes raises questions about the difference between omission and complete absence. John W. Aldridge declared that Carver,

along with writers like Joan Didion, Ann Beattie, and Donald and Frederick Barthelme, may be said to be the contemporary progenitors of the minimalist method, in which what is barely stated about a person or an experience is given a kind of subaqueous luminescence. . . . The ghostly presence of the eliminated is absolutely vital to the successful minimalist effect. But it is essential to know whether there is material that has been eliminated or material that is simply absent. The distinction is crucial and is perhaps best illustrated by the example of Hemingway, the minimalist Papa of them all. His famous short story, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," is conventionally cited as a piece of highly effective minimalist fiction, and it is so in large part because in planning the story Hemingway composed, but in the actual writing omitted, several elaborately detailed histories of the characters, even of the soldier and the girl who are briefly seen as they pass in the street outside the café.³³

Aldridge's assertions raise a number of issues, and Hemingway addressed some of them in *Death in the Afternoon*.³⁴ His position was that the writer must know what has been left out, but he offered no provision that suggests the material had to have actually been written and then excised. Hemingway left the issue open in that only a writer can confirm or deny whether he actually knows what has been withheld. Manuscripts, letters, and interviews are not always available to the public, and it would be disingenuous to argue that a narrative is ineffective only because there are no available means to confirm what precisely is absent.

Another important consideration is that knowledge of the omitted material is not always aesthetically beneficial. “Indian Camp” is an interesting story, and is perhaps enhanced, without the context of “Three Shots.” Nick Adams’s delusional conclusion that he would never die is a more complex realization if it is attributed to what he has seen in the shanty rather than to a hymn. Minimalist authors are exacting editors, and the most successful among them have exceptional instincts. “Big Two-Hearted River” is a better work of fiction because the “meditations” that comprised the original ending were removed.

The concept of absence is also pertinent to the discussion of whether Minimalist fiction addresses ethical, social, and political topics. In a round-table discussion of his play *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller explicated the role of omission from a slightly different perspective. Several of his co-panelists debated Willy Loman’s moral complexities and whether the play itself was intended to act as social criticism. Miller responded that

not only drama, but literature in general—and this goes back a long, long distance in history—posits the idea of value, of right and wrong, of good and bad, high and low, not so much by setting forth, but by showing so to speak, the wages of sin. In other words, when, for instance in “Death of a Salesman,” we are shown a man who dies for the want of some positive, viable human value, the play implies—and it could not have been written without the author’s consciousness that the audience did believe something different. In other words, by showing what happens where there are no values, I at least, assume that the audience will be compelled and propelled toward a more intense quest for the values that are missing.³⁵

Hemingway and other writers within the movement use this technique, often achieving the result Miller articulated. In *Deep Surfaces: Mass Culture & History in Postmodern American Fiction*, Philip E. Simmons addressed the same question in the context of statements made by Ann Beattie, saying that she “explains her avoidance of an editorializing narrator by saying, ‘I don’t think I have an overall view of things to express.’ To those critics and readers who expect a writer to have ‘an overall view of things,’ Beattie’s statement is an admission of failure: of moral vision, perhaps even of intelligence and skill.”³⁶ Simmons’s point is pertinent but accentuates a problem with the depth of particular content more than style.

Although it follows in the Minimalist tradition of non-intrusive narration, McCarthy’s *The Road* is in many ways an acute social commentary. He does not evade difficult and complex issues but rather explores serious themes such as death, empathy, and ethical responsibility. He does so in the manner Miller described, showing “what happens where there are no values.” The narrator in *The Road* reports the action with a poetic sensibility, using elaborate language to describe dark landscapes and brutal events, but does not engage in lengthy contemplation or synthesis. He presents an atmosphere marked by loss. Animals are gone and the trees are dead. Clean water is a rarity. In a depleted natural world, an earth devoid of governments and geopolitical development, day-to-day existence is reduced to core emotions and experiences. In McCarthy’s post-nuclear world, the importance of love and empathy is magnified through poignant illustrations of what human experience is like when such things are missing.

Given his precise, concentrated imagery, it is not surprising that McCarthy’s Minimalist novels have in recent years been successfully translated into cinema. In 2007, Joel and Ethan Coen adapted McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* into an Oscar-winning film. *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat, was released in 2009.³⁷ The Coen brothers have proven that they

themselves are adherents to the aesthetic. Two years after making *No Country*, they collaborated on *A Serious Man* (2009), a film that uses many of the techniques common to the mode, such as stark dialogue, subdued imagery, and the use of the Iceberg Principle. The movie begins with a psalm-like quotation from Rashi: “RECEIVE WITH SIMPLICITY EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS TO YOU.”³⁸ The concept of simplicity extends to the aesthetic of the *mis en scene*: every word and image in *A Serious Man* is presented with reserve and austerity. For example, few details about setting are directly communicated, but based on several clues it becomes apparent that the plot takes place in the western suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota. One scene is entitled “Lake Nokomis,” which is a reference to a recreational area near Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. In another scene, two characters discuss an orthodontist who visits a Red Owl grocery store in Bloomington, a town in the southwest of the metropolitan area.³⁹

Larry Gopnik, the protagonist in *A Serious Man*, is in many ways a typical Minimalist figure in that he resides in a suburban neighborhood composed of architecturally similar houses, living a life of quiet desperation. He is a physics professor at the University of Minnesota, an intelligent man whose inarticulate lectures suggest that he is a poor teacher. Like Hemingway’s Dr. Henry Adams, his tendency is to avoid conflict by acceding to the wishes of the more dominant people around him. When his neighbor, Mr. Brandt, begins to usurp a strip of land near the property line, Larry fails in his attempt to argue that the easement needs to be observed. He is generally ineffectual, lacking confidence in the face of tribulation. To use one of Hemingway’s most well-known phrases, the professor cannot maintain “grace under pressure.” When his wife, Judith, informs him that she wants a divorce so she can marry the allegorically-named Sy Ableman, he replies “A divorce—what have I done! I haven’t done anything—what have I done!”⁴⁰ Dr. Gopnik is being truthful: he is a man of inaction.

He returns to this idea often, insisting that he has not “done anything,” and it calls attention to the fact that his life is marked by a series of muted reactions. In his review of *A Serious Man*, Franz Lidz wrote that the film is an extended allusion to the Book of Job, a figure who, like Gopnik, suffers for no reason.⁴¹ Job is constantly tempted to scorn God and is even advised to do so by men he considers friends. Larry endures similar tortures but responds with much less conviction than does his biblical counterpart. When a graduate student attempts to bribe him into changing a failing grade and then threatens to sue him for defamation if he tells anyone about it, Gopnik does nothing. Because he does not ascribe to a governing ethic, adopting the idea that he must “accept mystery,” he allows events to dictate his responses.⁴² He meets with two of his rabbis with the hope of receiving guidance, and the second, Rabbi Nachtner, tells him that he must come to terms with the fact that “we can’t know everything.”⁴³ After his brother, Arthur, is arrested, Larry changes his student’s grade and keeps the money so he can pay for a criminal defense lawyer. Like the protagonists in Carver stories such as “Preservation” and “Careful,” he suppresses the complex nature of his thought processes in order to avoid conflict.

Larry Gopnik’s self-repressive nature is conveyed, in part, through the Coen brothers’ use of omission and implication. Larry is impotent in a number of ways, and part of his difficulty with his wife is his lack of sexual drive. In one of the most poignant scenes in the film, Gopnik ascends to the roof of his sterile suburban home to adjust the antenna so his devious son, Danny, can watch “F Troop.” While performing his adjustments, he happens to see that his shapely neighbor, Mrs. Samsky, is sunbathing naked on her back patio. He silently stares at her, entranced. In the next scene, he holds “a damp washcloth pressed to his forehead” because “his face is flaming red,” and the suggestion is that he was gazing at the woman for an extended period of time. Arthur does not ask him what he was doing out there for so long, instead saying

“boy. You should have worn a hat.”⁴⁴ Larry is generally an asexual figure, a man who does not assert himself with any sense of passion; his prolonged peeping indicates that he has desires but is unsure of how to respond to them.

Accentuating the concept of irresolvable mystery, the last scenes of *A Serious Man* imply much but do not offer a concrete sense of closure. Shortly after he changes his student's grade, Gopnik receives an ominous phone call from his doctor requesting an office visit to discuss x-ray results. Reminiscent of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *A Serious Man* is cyclical in that the protagonist ends where he begins: the film opens with Larry's visit to the clinic. In the same moment his father is driving through a violent storm, an imagistic correlative that represents Gopnik's chaotic internal state, the scene shifts to Danny as he stands in the parking lot of his Hebrew school while a tornado looms in the distance. And then the film ends. True to the Minimalist aesthetic, the Coens omit the outcome of each scenario, suggesting that difficulties are, at least for the Gopniks, an unrelenting and irresolvable inevitability.

The pacing of the imagery, the fragmentary shifting from moment to moment, reflects the accretive emotional strain Larry feels as the various routines in his life disintegrate. The vast majority of the scenes are short, containing perhaps five to ten lines of brief dialogue before transitioning into the next image. Many parts, such as “Skewed Angle on Parking Lot” and “Puffy White Clouds” (38, 40-42), contain little or no dialogue; the image of the vacant concrete space in the former and Larry's foray onto the roof of his house in the latter serve as the filmic equivalent of implicative reportage. The “montage effect” stems from the emphasis upon sensory experience, and each event depicts an emotionally intense moment in the Gopnik family's perilous journey. It is interesting that every part is given a separate title, accentuating the fact that the film is essentially a collection of interrelated vignettes. Many of the sequences are

stylistically similar to Hemingway's Imagistic, prose-poetic interchapters in that they are independent renderings of brief moments in time. Because the movie uses recurring characters and a unified plot, it is reminiscent of *Bright Lights*, *Caramelo*, and *Monkeys*, works that are fragmentary yet cohesive.

While it is significant that Oscar-winning writer-director-producers such as the Coen brothers are sustaining the Minimalist mode, the movement will also continue to be shaped by a number of talented Latino writers such as Luis Alberto Urrea, Stephen D. Gutierrez, and Dagoberto Gilb. Like Cisneros's work, their fiction follows in the stylistic tradition of Hemingway, Jorge Luis Borges, Clarice Lispector, and Eduardo Galeano. In addition to using allusion, implication, and efficient language, they tend to compose tales that celebrate common people whose lives deserve recognition and preservation. Similar to American Realist and Naturalist literature, Urrea, Gutierrez, and Gilb's stories are about "common people" who must negotiate difficult situations. Their narratives, however, are not about ethical crises, nor do they explicitly diagnose social "sicknesses" and suggest a "cure." Instead they create sparsely written pieces about complex yet seemingly mundane experiences.

Urrea's "The White Girl" (2008) is a brief character study that follows in the stylistic vein of the *crônica* in that it is a subtle, fragmentary contemplation of an emotionally significant event. 2 Short, the protagonist, is a "tagger," or graffiti artist, who one day discovers a junkyard full of decaying cars. He investigates the inside of a 1971 Dodge Charger and finds blood stains and human hair, and the implication is that the passenger or passengers who once drove the vehicle had died in a crash. He begins to reconstruct one of the victims in his mind, imagining who she was based on a pair of objects he finds as he searches the compartment. The narrator recounts that

he found her bracelet under the seat. Her wrist must have been slender. It was a little gold chain with a little blue stone heart. He held it in his palm. Chick must have croaked right here. He stared at the starred windshield. The way it was pushed out around the terrible cracks. Still brown. More blood. And then the hair.

The paratactic, declarative sentences, as well as the morbid yet emotionally charged content, are reminiscent of the work of Hemingway and McCarthy. 2 Short finds himself in a dangerous waste land, a figurative graveyard, connecting with the lost memory of a “white girl” whom he has never known. He takes some of her hair home with him, rubbing it “over his lips.”⁴⁵ Unable to come to terms with what he has seen and touched, he begins to tag train cars with “THE WHITE GIRL,” and the speaker says that 2 Short “sent it out to the world. He prayed with his can. He could not stop.”⁴⁶ He experiences an epiphany, but like the narrator in Carver’s “Cathedral” is unable to fathom its significance. Consistent with the Minimalist tradition, neither the narrator nor the protagonist explain the meaning behind his deeds.

The story is highly implicative, however, and suggests that the protagonist is a contemplative, empathic person who is, to borrow Crane’s metaphor, struggling to blossom “in a mud puddle.” 2 Short is a *vato*, a hustler, who understands the realities of life on the streets. He tags to mark “turf” for his gang. He also feels the pull of other influences, a father who feeds “shorties sometimes when they don’t have anywhere to go” and would “like 2 Short to stay in school.” Indirectly conveying the young man’s innermost thoughts, the speaker says that 2 Short is “not some nature pussy or nothing, but he likes the yard. Likes the old orange tree. The nopal cactus his pops cuts up and fries with eggs. 2 Short studies shit like birds and butterflies, tries to get their shapes and their colors in his tag book. Hummingbirds.”⁴⁷ He is inquisitive, and his

graffiti, though a type of vandalism, is also a creative outlet. When he encounters the remains of “the white girl,” he is confronted with a stark reminder of his own mortality and, like Nick Adams in “Indian Camp,” is unprepared to process what the experience means. By spraying a euphemistic name on containers sent out into the world, he is essentially expressing his own desire to be known and remembered.

Gutierrez’s “Clownpants Molina” (2008) is similar to “The White Girl” because it too is a eulogistic character sketch, the difference being that the eponymous character is not yet dead. Told in a declarative, quick-fire style, the nameless narrator sees an old acquaintance, Johnny “Clownpants” Molina, begging in front of a neighborhood hardware store. In the brief moment in which he sees Johnny and decides to give him a dollar, the speaker begins to think through the mendicant’s gradual decline. Clownpants earned his nickname because one day during middle school he wore pink baggy pants with “wide pockets sewn on to the front,” a fashion choice that suggests he craved attention whether positive or negative.⁴⁸ Never fully accepted by the narrator’s circle, Johnny began to drink heavily and fell in with another group. Underneath his hard-boiled exterior, the speaker seems to lament what happened to the man, remembering that “Clownpants Molina didn’t say much. But he was cool. Always a friend, just not tight anymore. Involved in his own set away from yours, doing things, you heard, that were crazy and stupid. Smoking dust. Shooting up. Killing.”⁴⁹ The implication is that the narrator knows the temptations that have ruined his friend, and his approach to him intimates that he sees him as a cautionary figure, a glimpse of what lies in his future if he is not careful.

The most poignant image in the story appears when the speaker considers that Johnny’s decline involves living “by the worst factories in town” and that his night job entails sweeping blood off of the floor at a chicken processing plant. Life inside the building mirrors the

hopelessness and brutality that has contributed to Molina's downfall: "Men standing on tall ladders pulled chickens out of the cramped cages and hung them upside down on the conveyor belt taking them inside in a quick efficient line of death. Stunk awful. Blood. 'Man, let's get out of here'."⁵⁰ Like Lowell, Hemingway, Carver, and others, Gutierrez renders a synesthetic scene that represents a central emotional complex: the killing line adumbrates Johnny's inexorable movement towards his end. As he ponders Johnny's progressive descent, a path that can only lead to his demise, the narrator considers his own need for self-preservation. "Clownpants Molina" is predicated on the inevitability of death, a topic the speaker does not want to openly discuss.

Gutierrez's tale is reminiscent of Hemingway's narratives in that it involves what Gerry Brenner called a "lexical riddle," an important word or term that is implied but omitted from the story.⁵¹ The speaker in "Clownpants Molina" will not acknowledge that Johnny is going to die, an admission that would lead him to consider his own mortality, just as the couple in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" will not openly discuss abortion. Dagoberto Gilb's "Shout" (2001), a vignette about domestic tension set on an uncomfortably warm evening in southern California, also uses this technique. The plot is fairly simple: a nameless husband returns home from a long day at work hoping to drink five or six beers and doze off before waking up and repeating the same pattern the next day. Irritated that he cannot relax with his wife and children around, he begins to yell and make threats. After he calms down for a few moments, he explodes again because his two oldest sons are complaining about bedtime and his infant is crying. He hears someone yell "SHUT THAT FUCKING KID UP YOU FUCKING PEOPLE!" and rushes outside to confront the offender.⁵² It is the turning point in the narrative.

With his rage redirected away from his family and his role changed from aggressor to defender, he seems to recall that his allegiance should be to his wife and children.

The denouement is communicated in a soft moment that starkly contrasts with the violence of the first two-thirds of the story. The narrator partially reveals the reasons for the protagonist's anger. Gilb largely omits but implies two key plot points, the first of which is that the man is having some type of problem at his job. The first time her husband calms down, the wife asks "so nothing happened today?". He reveals few details, responding that "nothing else was said. Maybe nothing's gonna happen. God knows this heat's making everybody act unnatural. But tomorrow's check day. If he's gonna get me it'll be tomorrow."⁵³ While the implications are not completely clear, the protagonist's answer indicates that his irritation is in part work-related. Given his quick temper, perhaps the man has offended someone and must be on the lookout for an act of revenge.

The second plot point omitted but implied involves the wife's revelation that she is pregnant with the couple's fourth child. Once she realizes that her husband's anger has been permanently redirected, they have a conversation that suggests that a previous, important discussion took place before the current action takes place. Fighting his wife's reticence, the protagonist asks

"So what did they say? . . . At the clinic?"

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"That I am."

They both listened to the fan and to the mix of music from the Armenians and that TV upstairs.

“I would’ve never thought it could happen,” he said. “That one time, and it wasn’t even good.”

“Maybe for you. I knew it then.”

“You did?”⁵⁴

On the surface, the dialogue seems as if it is between two people who care little for each other, who are profoundly disconnected. The underlying aggression, the inherent refusal to say more than the absolute minimum, implies that the husband and wife are withholding considerable emotional weight from one another. After they finish their cryptic conversation, the man apologizes for yelling and the couple makes love. They remain unable to openly say the words “pregnant” or “child,” an indication that they are unprepared to come to terms with the looming events of the future. His job in jeopardy, the man resorts to physical stimulation as a means to assuage his internal sense of uncertainty.

“Shout” is a sensorial piece, and Gilb uses imagistic correlative in the same manner as Lowell and Hemingway. Just as the glowing lava of Mt. Vesuvius represents Admiral Nelson’s simmering passion for Emma Hamilton in Lowell’s “Sea-Blue and Blood-Red,” the unbearable hotness reflects the man’s rising stress level. As night sets in, his anger begins to dissipate, in part because he is able to release it on the disembodied voice from outside. The constant background noise, the drone of a fan and the muffled sound of a neighbor’s television, subtly mimics the ongoing internal tension the protagonist must cope with. He cannot escape noise and motion, the bombardment of his senses. The suggestion is that he drinks to numb his receptors, to escape for a short time before the cycle begins again. Try as he may, he cannot evade the ubiquitous “heat.”

By composing stories in which every image is meaningful and essential, Urrea, Gutiérrez, and Gilb accomplish much in works that are relatively short in length, a testament to the economy of their prose. Their narrators and protagonists are rarely articulate, men who are unable to explain why they are intrigued by mundane things such as a dead woman's bracelet or a beggar sitting in front of a hardware store. In other words, the central figures are in the process of confronting their own epistemic limitations, sifting through the details of their experiences as a means to discover something about themselves. However, they are unsuccessful in terms of synthesis. Much is left unresolved, and the implication is that it is necessary, in a broad sense, to "accept mystery." Urrea, Gutiérrez, and Gilb do not offer simple answers to complex problems but, much like their fellow Minimalists, present the intricacies of life in precise, sensorial detail.

Throughout the last eleven decades, American Minimalist fiction has effectively provided a counterbalance to more verbose prose styles. Rather than engaging in long-standing political arguments or choosing sides in debates over morality, both of which have been done with aplomb by contemporary authors such as Michael Chabon and the late David Foster Wallace, writers within the tradition have tended to write pieces that invite a wide range of interpretations. Through authorial self-effacement and the use of non-intrusive narrators, they direct attention to the intricacies of their art. If there is one central philosophy in the mode, it is that enduring literature results from superior craftsmanship. Content is subservient to style. In *Hemingway's Craft*, Sheldon Norman Grebstein articulated a "truth" about Hemingway that applies to all of the authors in the category when he wrote that "if we approach Hemingway's fiction primarily by way of its craft, we will discover that the work offers its own reply to the major and persistent complaint that it is narrow in range and intellectually thin. In sum, the very structure or pattern of Hemingway's stories comprises a form of thought, perhaps for an artist the most cogent kind:

form as thought.”⁵⁵ The consistent abstention from social criticism is in effect an insistence that such things are essentially abstractions that draw attention away from the intricacies of a well-written narrative. Regardless of what they write about, authors within the movement are meticulous with words and careful in their use of devices. From Lowell to McCarthy, each author demonstrates a dedication to careful editing and refinement. Antithetical to the tradition of O’Henry and Guy de Maupassant, austere fiction suggests that a well-constructed story is greater than one that conveys a pleasing anecdote or sentiment.

Notes

¹ Amy Lowell, "Hedge Island," *Can Grande's Castle* (New York: MacMillan, 1919), p. 102.

² Lowell, "Hedge Island," p. 103.

³ Sandra Cisneros, "Those Who Don't," *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 28.

⁴ Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York: MacMillan, 1920), p. 247, and James D. Brasch and Joseph Sigman, *Hemingway's Library: A Composite Record*, 2000 Electronic Edition, John F. Kennedy Library, p. 231.

<<http://www.jfklibrary.org/NR/rdonlyres/D809DDAD-CCC6-4C97-8505-9AC5E224200D/19103/hemingwayslibrary99.pdf>>. Accessed Sept. 25, 2010, 9:15 P. M.

⁵ Ernest Hemingway, "Chapter III," *In Our Time* (New York: Scribner, 1930), p. 28.

⁶ George Cheatham, "The World War I Battle of Mons and Hemingway's *In Our Time* Chapter III," *The Hemingway Review* 26, no. 2 (2007): 53.

⁷ Charles A. Fenton, *The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway: The Early Years* (New York: Viking, 1960), p. 238.

⁸ Richard B. Woodward, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," *New York Times Magazine* (Apr. 19, 1992), p. 30.

⁹ Ann-Marie Karlsson, "The Hyperrealistic Short Story: A Postmodern Twilight Zone," *Criticism in the Twilight Zone: Postmodern Perspectives on Literature and Politics*, ed. Danuta Zadworna-Fjellstad and Lennart Björk (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1990), p. 147.

¹⁰ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 21.

¹¹ For an excellent discussion of the many locations alluded to in *The Road*, see Wesley G. Morgan, "The Route and Roots of *The Road*," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (Autumn 2008): 39-47.

¹² Raymond Carver, "Cathedral," *Cathedral* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 209.

¹³ Carver, "Cathedral," p. 227.

¹⁴ Raymond Carver and William L. Stull, "Matters of Life and Death," *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 185.

¹⁵ Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, *The Portable Stephen Crane*, ed. Joseph Katz (New York: Viking, 1977), p. 74.

¹⁶ Ernest Hemingway, "Indian Camp," *In Our Time* (New York: Scribner, 1930), p. 19.

¹⁷ Ernest Hemingway, "Chapter VI," *In Our Time* (New York: Scribner, 1930), p. 63.

¹⁸ Ernest Hemingway, "Indian Camp," manuscripts, folder 493, Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, pp. 5-6.

¹⁹ Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (New York: Vintage, 1984), p. 182.

²⁰ Susan Minot, *Monkeys* (New York: Vintage, 1986), p. 158.

²¹ McInerney, *Bright Lights*, p. 43.

²² See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1971), p. 291, and Horace Gregory, *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet In Her Time* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1958), p. 118.

²³ Wyndham Lewis, "The Dumb Ox: A Study of Ernest Hemingway, 'Life and Letters'," *Hemingway: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 186.

²⁴ For a concise summary of Hemingway's involvement in *The Spanish Earth*, see Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 307-12.

²⁵ Quoted in Philip E. Simmons, *Deep Surfaces: Mass Culture & History in Postmodern American Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p. 125.

²⁶ Mark Helprin, "Introduction: The Canon Under Siege," *The Best American Short Stories 1988*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), p. xxv.

²⁷ Robert Rebein, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction After Postmodernism* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009), p. 42.

²⁸ Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo* (New York: Vintage, 2002), p. 63.

²⁹ Cisneros, *Caramelo*, p. 18.

³⁰ Ernest Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River: Part I," *In Our Time* (New York: Scribner, 1930), p. 139.

³¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, p. 88.

³² Rebein, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, pp. 38-39.

³³ John W. Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), pp. 48-49.

³⁴ See Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1932), p. 192.

³⁵ Arthur Miller and others, "'Death of a Salesman': A Symposium," *The Tulane Drama Review* 2, no. 3 (1958): 67.

³⁶ Philip E. Simmons, *Deep Surfaces*, p. 124.

³⁷ See "The Road," Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0898367/>. Accessed March 2, 2011, 10:35 P. M.

³⁸ Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, *A Serious Man* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 3.

³⁹ The motivation for the setting was autobiographical: the Coens grew up in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, a suburb west of Minneapolis. See Franz Lidz, "Biblical Adversity in a '60s Suburb," *New York Times* (Sept. 27, 2009): AR9.

⁴⁰ Coen and Coen, *A Serious Man*, p. 27.

⁴¹ Lidz, "Biblical Adversity in a '60s Suburb," AR9.

⁴² Coen and Coen, *A Serious Man*, p. 58.

⁴³ Coen and Coen, *A Serious Man*, p. 82.

⁴⁴ Coen and Coen, *A Serious Man*, p. 42.

⁴⁵ Luis Alberto Urrea, "The White Girl," *Latinos in Lotusland: An Anthology of Contemporary Southern California Literature* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 2008), p. 22.

⁴⁶ Urrea, "The White Girl," p. 23.

⁴⁷ Urrea, "The White Girl," p. 21.

⁴⁸ Stephen D. Gutiérrez, "Clownpants Molina," *Latinos in Lotusland: An Anthology of Contemporary Southern California Literature* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 2008), p. 117.

⁴⁹ Gutiérrez, "Clownpants Molina," p. 120.

⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, "Clownpants Molina," p. 119.

⁵¹ See Gerry Brenner, "From 'Sepi Jingan' to 'The Mother of a Queen': Hemingway's Three Epistemologic Formulas for Short Fiction," *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 161.

⁵² Dagoberto Gilb, "Shout," *Woodcuts of Women* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), p. 52.

⁵³ Gilb, "Shout," p. 50.

⁵⁴ Gilb, "Shout," p. 53.

⁵⁵ Sheldon Norman Grebstein, *Hemingway's Craft* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 26.

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