

RAYMOND CARVER'S SEQUENTIAL VISION:
WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET, PLEASE? AND CATHEDRAL

by

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ABSTRACT

The most recent major addition to short story sequence theory is J. Gerald Kennedy's Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities (1995). Kennedy, adopting an all-inclusive stance based on the potentially infinite responses a reader may have to a given text, applies the word sequence to "all collections of three or more stories by a single author" (ix). He goes on to explore discontinuities in Raymond Carver's collection of short fiction Cathedral (1983), arguing that its stories work collectively to "imply the breakdown of communal relations in ordinary, middle-class experience" (xiv). On this basis, Kennedy solidly places Cathedral—heretofore not generally considered a sequence—in the sequence genre. Kennedy's study of Cathedral prompts us to re-examine the range of Carver's work in the short story genre. This thesis contends that Carver's first major collection of stories, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, possesses significant sequential characteristics. Cathedral, his last major collection, goes much further. Its design, which carefully builds ambiguity into the patterning of its stories, complicates our attempts to discover thematic unity, and ultimately produces a complex sequential vision.

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INTRODUCTION

The tradition of linking individual poems, stories or dramas with the explicit intention of forming larger structures was originally an oral one--critics often cite Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey as being the first major such collections (see, for example, Mann 1). From Homer, we can trace a line through Ovid's Metamorphoses, Boccaccio's The Decameron, and Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, to Shakespeare's sonnet sequences and linked plays (the three parts of Henry the Sixth, for instance). Continuing the line, but restricting ourselves to the English language tradition only, would take us into the epic-length poetry of the eighteenth century--poems such as James Thomson's The Seasons (1726-30), a long poem in four parts, each originally published independently, or William Cowper's six-part The Task (1785).

In the last two hundred years or so, sequential literature has mainly taken the form of collections of

linked short stories. Critic J. Gerald Kennedy notes that "unlike the novel, the short story has no individual market value; it becomes saleable only as a component within a periodical or published collection" ("Poetics" 9).

Beginning around the year 1830, "a date associated with the rise of Western capitalism" (9), the single short story's marketability problem was solved with the publication of collections of short stories in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. Some of these made use of overarching, "framing" elements which loosely linked their component stories. For example, the vignettes which compose Washington Irving's The Sketchbook (1819-20) are connected by their fictitious narrator, Geoffrey Crayon.

The Sketchbook initiated the "sketchbook tradition", which can be viewed as the forerunner of the short story sequence. "Sketchbooks" are, generally-speaking, collections of short, autonomous prose essays, tales and vignettes linked by a common narrator or geographical setting. Another work in the "sketchbook" tradition is Mary Russell Mitford's Our Village (1824), a collection which first appeared as a series of instalments in an English publication, The Lady's Magazine, and initially titled "Sketches of Village Life." Its fictitious episodes, self-contained but interconnected, take us into the world of a

small rural English village. A later "sketchbook" is Charles Dickens' well-known Sketches by Boz (1836), the compilation of a number of previously-published "street sketches," plus a few unpublished ones, ranging in subject from descriptions of Victorian London to commentaries on politics, particular politicians, and courts of law. This variety of subject matter reminds us that "sketchbooks" tended to be, at most, only marginally unified. The only obvious connection between Dickens' sketches is that they are ostensibly by his fictitious alter ego, Boz.

The "sketchbook" tradition leads into, and to some extent merges with, the tradition of the linked short story volume. Early examples of these tend to focus on a particular, and often culturally-distinct, geographical location. There are exceptions--Edgar Allan Poe's Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840) are linked by their horrific subject matter, and George Eliot's Scenes of Clerical Life (1858) by the profession of the characters on which they centre. Some other early linked short story collections would include Herman Melville's Piazza Tales (1856), Hamlin Garland's Main-Travelled Roads (1891), Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Books (1894-95), Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896), and Stephen Crane's Whilomville Stories (1900). In many instances,

these collections are "shaped more by the exigencies of publication than by authorial design" (Kennedy, "Poetics" 10). A notable Russian proto-sequence is Ivan Turgenev's collection of sketches of Russian rural life, A Sportsman's Notebook (1847-51), which, as Susan Garland Mann points out, "influenced some of the most important cycles written during the beginning of the twentieth century, including . . . Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio and Hemingway's In Our Time" (5).

The period generally thought to mark the true beginning of the short story sequence tradition, or the "Winesburg form," spanned the first quarter of this century. Corresponding to the era of high modernism, it was the time in which James Joyce's Dubliners (1914), Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio (1919), and Ernest Hemingway's In Our Time (1924) were written and consciously published as volumes of linked short stories. Since the publication of these landmark volumes, there has been nothing short of an explosion in the genre. Susan Garland Mann provides a thorough--but not exhaustive--annotated list of story sequences written in this century in her 1989 study The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide. Among the most notable names in it, aside from the ones listed above, would be: John Barth, Albert Camus, William

Faulkner, Henry James, Franz Kafka, Alice Munro, Joyce Carol Oates, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, John Steinbeck and Edith Wharton.

With such a lineage in mind, it is surprising that serious theoretical study of the genre has begun only relatively recently. Many critics are, indeed, baffled by this--J. Gerald Kennedy writes that "critical neglect of the genre remains almost inexplicable" (Modern Sequences xi). Perhaps part of the explanation lies with the fact that the short story sequence often finds itself suspended, rather precariously, between the single-author collection of unrelated short stories on the one hand, and the novel on the other, demonstrating elements of both but ultimately being neither. We might also look to the traditional marginalization of the short story form by the literary canon, discussed by Frank O'Connor in The Lonely Voice (1963).

It was, perhaps not altogether surprisingly, authors of early short story sequences rather than critics who first recognized the new genre which they, after all, were responsible for creating. Before he had written more than three stories of Dubliners, James Joyce had explicitly identified paralysis as the central, overarching theme of

the entire volume (Werner 39). It is also clear from letters written during the early stages of Dubliners that "[Joyce] was seeking a form that would enable the individual stories to echo and comment on one another, thereby expanding the significance of apparently trivial events" (39).

Elizabeth Bowen, by contrast, appears to have become conscious of the sequential nature of her collection The Demon Lover and Other Stories (1945) only after it was completed. In a postscript to the volume, she writes:

Till the proofs came, I had not re-read my stories since they were, singly, written. When I read them straight through as a collection, I was most struck by what they have in common. This integrates them and gives them a cumulative and collective meaning that no one, taken singly, has by itself. The Demon Lover is an organic whole: not merely a collection, but somehow—for better or worse—a book. (218)

Bowen's delineation of meaning in The Demon Lover, as we shall see, in fact closely approximates the standard definition of the short story sequence as formulated by

theorists of the genre in the last quarter century.

In an essay entitled "Why Write?," John Updike, author of several short story sequences including Olinger Stories: A Selection (1964) and Bech: A Book (1970), links the process of creating fiction to one of the most basic of childhood imaginative impulses, that of drawing separate objects on a piece of paper and connecting them "so that they all [become] the fruit of a single impossible tree" (34). This simple action, Updike contends, may be "as deep . . . as the urge to hear a story from beginning to end, or the little ecstasy of extracting resemblances from different things" and for him recurs when crafting "several disparate incidents or impressions into the shape of a single story" (34). Updike implicitly acknowledges what is perhaps the single most important task for the sequence author, that of uniting "disparate impressions or incidents" into some sort of a larger whole. He furthermore recognizes the act as one which is fundamental to human nature.

In the 1930s and '40s, critics did begin tentatively to recognize the existence of a literary form that was neither novel nor story miscellany, but perhaps located somewhere in between the two (Mann ix). No book-length analysis of the sequence as a genre independent of the short story and the novel was undertaken, however, until Forrest L. Ingram's

ground-breaking 1971 study Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre.

Ingram's definition of the story sequence (or cycle, as he termed it, after the related poetic genre, the lyric cycle) became the critical standard for nearly twenty years:

"A STORY CYCLE . . . is a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain the balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit" (15). This definition represents something of an amalgam of two earlier definitions. Helen M. Mustard, in her critical history The Lyric Cycle in German Literature (1946), defined the lyric cycle as "a group of poems indicated by their author as belonging together" (qtd. in Ingram 15). P. M. Kramer, in The Cyclical Method of Composition in Gottfried Keller's Sinngedicht (1939) used the word "cycle" to describe tightly-organized story collections in which the "action of the [overarching] story returns to its starting point after having progressed through several stages" (qtd. in Ingram 15).

Ingram's definition of the story cycle is considerably broader than Kramer's, which was essentially invented to describe a single work, Das Sinngedicht by Gottfried Keller.

Indeed, Ingram extends his definition to both collected and uncollected sets of stories, as well as to genres other than

the short story: "In this general definition, stories could be in prose or verse, by one author or more, collected or uncollected. They could be tales, anecdotes, fables, Marchen, epic episodes, gestes, or formal short stories" (15). Sets of related stories that have been collected are divided by Ingram into three types: "composed" texts, conceived by the author from the outset as a collection of related stories; "completed" texts, in which new stories have been added to previous, independently-published stories which the author has decided should be brought together in a single volume; and "arranged" texts, which are authorial assemblages of previously- and independently-published stories. According to Ingram, however, a set of stories does not necessarily have to have been collected for it to be a cycle: he cites J.D. Salinger's Glass family stories as being an example of a cycle never formally collected by its author.

Despite this very inclusive initial definition, Ingram in practice limits himself to deliberately-collected short story sequences in the studies which make up the main of his book. He examines Kafka's Ein Hungerkünstler in terms of the successive reinforcement of several themes; Faulkner's The Unvanquished in terms of structural, thematic and character links between its stories; and, finally, Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio in terms of the structural

techniques, symbolism, and characters its stories have in common. In all three cases, Ingram demonstrates that while the individual stories can stand independently of one another, there is compelling evidence that the authors have carefully established patterns of mutual reinforcement, or as Ingram puts it, of "recurrence and development" (20). The end product of these patterns is that "the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (19).

Ingram's chief contribution to the study of the short story sequence genre was the establishment of a working definition based upon recurring elements among independently-operating stories. The first important modifications to Ingram's findings appeared in an article by University of Louisiana scholar J. Gerald Kennedy entitled "Toward a Poetics of the Short Story Cycle," published in a special issue of the Journal of the Short Story in English (Number 11, Autumn 1988). The article is, in the main, an analysis of various aspects of the short story sequence form. Kennedy examines the role of the sequence's title; aspects of the form's "textual structure," including the arrangement of stories in a sequence and the importance of authorial introductions and epilogues, if they are present; overt links between a sequence's stories, such as recurring

character types or geographical locations (Kennedy labels these "intertextual signs"); and, finally, "narrative deep structures"—underlying parallels between the construction of individual stories. Kennedy provides a useful example of "narrative deep structure," to illustrate just what he means by the term. He notes that many of the stories in Dubliners have Joyce's protagonists confronting "characters who hold out the possibility of what seems a more fulfilling life These opportunities collapse, however, revealing blindness, disillusionment, or that failure of the will which Joyce liked to call 'paralysis'" (24).

What is perhaps most significant about Kennedy's 1988 article, however, is its explicit attack on Ingram's argument in favour of the unity of short story sequences. Kennedy, whose approach is, fundamentally, a reader-oriented one, notes that "[Ingram] treats the ostensible unity of [the sequences he analyses] as an intrinsic feature of the writing rather than as a function or product of his own reading" (11). He furthermore argues that "works which we intuitively perceive as short story ensembles may rely as much upon fragmentation and discontinuity as upon unifying associations" (11). Kennedy's argument for a fresh look at all short story collections with an eye to their discontinuities as well as their "unifying associations" is not fully developed here, but it is the cornerstone of his

later work on Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities (1995).

The next book-length study of the sequence form to follow Ingram's was that by Susan Garland Mann mentioned above, The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide (1989). As we will see, her theoretical study of the genre served to broaden significantly its definition. Between Ingram's study and Mann's, many more short story collections which came to be viewed as sequences appeared in print. It is perhaps this fact which enabled Mann to begin examining the standard conventions associated with the short story sequence as they appeared to be developing, as well as the most common patterns of recurrence, in a way that Ingram was not able to.

Just as Ingram does, Mann notes the "simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence" (15) of stories in a short story cycle, and the tension between the two which the reader will inevitably feel. She refutes, however, the idea that a balance must be struck between the characteristics of self-sufficiency and interdependence:

Apart from the fact that "balance" is a quantitative term applied to something that cannot be quantified, the concept is problematic because those who use it do not address the variables

involved in the reading process. Moreover, the term introduces a method of evaluating short story cycles that is suspect. (21)

Removing the concept of balance between self-sufficiency and interdependence necessarily broadens the definition of what can constitute a short story sequence. A sequence's story-units may tend towards self-sufficiency, or towards interdependence. There does not have to be--indeed there cannot be--a strict balance.

There are certain "generic signals" which Mann associates with the short story sequence--immediate indications to the reader that what he or she is about to read is probably a sequence, as opposed to a novel or miscellany of stories. The title of a story collection, for instance, may suggest a unity--Anderson's well-known volume is entitled Winesburg, Ohio rather than, say, Stories by Sherwood Anderson. A sequence's table of contents usually distinguishes itself from that of a novel by listing the names of the volume's stories, as opposed to chapter numbers. In some instances, the author may introduce the work in question as being sequential in nature.

Obviously, though, the reader must read and decide for himself whether or not he has a working sequence in hand. To aid this endeavour, Mann has identified several common

types of twentieth-century sequences. Some sequences revolve around the maturation of a single protagonist (the bildungsroman) or artist (the kunstlerroman)--an example of the latter would be Winesburg, Ohio, many of the stories of which centre on the fledgling writer George Willard. Mann notes that "the form of the cycle is especially well suited to describe the maturation process, since it allows the writer to focus on only those people and incidents that are essential to character development" (9). Other sequences centre on a "composite" protagonist or "composite personality". Dubliners, for instance, moves chronologically from the childhood years through adolescence to maturity, but deals with many different Dubliners in so doing, rather than a single protagonist.

Another body of sequences is united by a theme "of isolation or fragmentation or indeterminacy," or a related theme based upon "the inability of characters to connect" (Mann 11). Mann quotes Raymond Joel Silverman writing on Winesburg, Ohio: "In story after story, the theme of loneliness, the motif of walls between people, the lack of communication, all demand a structure which will intensify the feeling of the tremendous gulf between people" (11). The structure of the short story sequence meets this demand--Mann observes that "the lack of continuity (or the gaps that exist between stories in cycles) is used by writers to

emphasize the fragmentary nature of life, especially in the twentieth century" (12).

Mann dwells briefly on sequences which are "devoted to statements about art in general, especially the difficulty of being an artist" (13), such as Barth's Lost in the Funhouse (1968). There are also those sequences which concentrate on a particular physical community. Of these, some are concerned with recreating a particular historical epoch. Others deal with places which have "mythic rather than historic importance" (13). Mann quotes Forrest Ingram:

The writers of today often seem intent on building mythic kingdoms of some sort. Faulkner has his Yoknapatawpha County, Steinbeck his Pastures of Heaven, Camus his kingdom of solidarity, Joyce his city of paralysis, and Anderson his Winesburg. Heroes, usually diminished in stature, roam the imaginary streets and plains of these kingdoms.
(13)

One might add to this list Sarah Orne Jewet's Country of the Pointed Firs, Margaret Laurence's Manawaka, Stephen Leacock's Mariposa, and V.S. Naipaul's Miguel Street.

In the same year that Mann's study appeared, Robert M.

Luscher published an important article entitled "The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book"--it is collected in Short Story Theory at a Crossroads, edited by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Luscher's definition of the short story sequence is also a reader-oriented one: "the short story sequence [is] . . . a volume of stories, collected and organized by their author, in which the reader successively realizes underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme" (148). It should be noted that Luscher is the first major theorist of the form to use the term 'sequence' as opposed to 'cycle,' arguing that the latter "draws attention to the recurrence of theme, symbol, and character, but does so at the expense of deemphasizing the volume's successiveness" (149). Elsewhere he defends his use of the word sequence in this way: "The reader's dominant experience as he negotiates the text and tentatively assembles its patterns is sequential" (Regional Sequences 7).

Luscher devotes a considerable amount of the article to discussing the reader's actual experience of the short story sequence. While acknowledging the obvious fact that all literary genres make certain demands upon the reader, he argues that these demands are intensified by the sequence form due to its "loose" format. This intensification has its own particular rewards: "The loosening of restraints

lends the short story sequence appeal by perpetuating a greater awareness of alternative formal, rhythmic, and thematic possibilities and by engaging the reader in creating meaning and assembling its parts" ("Open Book" 158). Luscher's focus on the role of the reader in helping to "create" the sequence has contributed to a shift in theoretical emphasis in the study of the genre from authorial intent (so important in Ingram's study) to reader-interpretation.

Luscher goes on implicitly to extend Mann's refutation of the sequence's need to balance somehow the qualities of self-sufficiency and interdependence. Indeed, he sees sequences as falling into the "expansive middle territory" ("Open Book" 163) of a broad continuum, rather than being enclosed within a narrow definition. The ends of the continuum are marked by the miscellaneous collection of short stories on the one hand, in which "the author makes little or no attempt to bring the collection together" (163), and the traditional novel on the other. Some sequences (he cites Faulkner's Go Down, Moses as an example) are so consciously and tightly unified that they approach novel-status. A volume such as Winesburg, Ohio, which does, in Luscher's opinion, "[illustrate] a balanced tension between the independence of each story and the unity of the collection as a whole" (163) should be located on the

midpoint of the continuum. There are, finally, sequences that are loosely, or even only marginally, unified. Since no two readers are liable to agree exactly on a short story volume's degree of unity, there is no fail-safe method of placing collections on this continuum, however, or even of determining whether or not a work is a novel, a sequence, or a miscellaneous collection (see endnote).

The most recent major study of the genre is a collection of eleven essays, edited by J. Gerald Kennedy, titled Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities (1995). Kennedy's stated aim in its publication is to "extend the preliminary inquiries of Ingram and Mann and to initiate a more openly speculative consideration of story sequences" (ix). Kennedy is responsible for the volume's introduction, as well as its final essay, titled "From Anderson's Winesburg to Carver's Cathedral: The Short Story Sequence and the Semblance of Community." He makes the controversial theoretical assertion that the definition of the sequence needs to be much broader than it has previously been.

It was noted that Ingram's definition of the short story sequence was broadened by Mann. In his introduction, Kennedy redefines the sequence in far more inclusive terms than either Ingram or Mann does--Kennedy's definition is "a

formal rubric that may be said to include all collections of three or more stories written and arranged by a single author" (ix). He argues that this expansive definition is simply the logical extension of earlier definitions. Citing Ingram's three types of story sequences, the "composed" text, the "completed" text, and the "arranged" text, Kennedy argues that the line between the three may be blurred by ambiguities in composition history, and that these same ambiguities may also make the arranged text indistinguishable from the non-authorial collection of assorted stories. Kennedy goes on to add:

In a sense, every single-author volume of stories manifests certain narrative homologies, commonalities of style or sensibility, that (in the absence of scholarly evidence) might be construed as a predetermined design. Given the ultimate inscrutability--if not irrelevance--of authorial intention, we face the impossibility of distinguishing in certain cases between ordered sequences and mere selections of stories editorially arranged. One must concede at last that textual unity, like beauty, lies mainly in the eye of the beholding reader. (ix)

Whether or not we agree with Kennedy's ultra-general

definition, it challenges us to re-examine earlier definitions of the short story sequence, and, by implication, short story collections not heretofore considered sequences.

Cathedral (1983) is probably Raymond Carver's best-known and most critically-acclaimed collection of short stories. Although unities underlying at least some of its stories have been uncovered, it has not been considered a sequence by the mainstream of critical thought. Kennedy argues in the final essay of his book that Cathedral is indeed a sequence, and he links it directly with that hallmark American sequence, Winesburg, Ohio. What is controversial about Kennedy's approach to both Cathedral and Winesburg is that he focuses on discontinuities, rather than unities, as the key to understanding Carver's (and Anderson's) overarching message. More specifically, Kennedy aims "to show how discontinuities in both works imply the breakdown of ordinary, middle-class experience" (xiv).

In a direct attack on recent criticism of Cathedral by Ewing Campbell and others that ultimately sees the volume as an "optimistic, sanguine portrayal of life in the early eighties" (203), Kennedy instead argues that we are merely teased by moments of hope in a few of the stories. The actual character of the collection, in Kennedy's view, is

defined by three signs of "postmodern sickness"--alcoholism, rootlessness, and the effect of television. These, reinforced by the very nature of the sequence form, lead to the absence of community that ultimately make Cathedral a negative, even despairing vision of American life in the 1980s.

Why does Kennedy focus on discontinuity in the sequence form when most previous critics have come at the problem from the opposite direction? Kennedy's reader-oriented approach has been noted; his arguments seem to be informed by at least some of the work in reader-response and reception theory which would have been widely known to critics in the 1980s. Wolfgang Iser, for example, focuses in his research into the reading process on "the way in which 'gaps' or 'blanks' in literary texts stimulate the reader to construct meanings which would not otherwise come into existence" (Lodge 211). The particular utility of Iser's line of thinking in understanding how we interpret short story sequences is briefly noted by Luscher in the essay considered above. The idea of 'gaps' as being central to our understanding of the sequence form is clearly at the forefront of Kennedy's approach.

In a rapidly-changing society, the short story, and the short story sequence, also seem to be transforming. Critics

have begun to recognize this, and are calling for new ways of reading and interpreting the short story. Miriam Marty Clark, in a 1995 article entitled "Contemporary Short Fiction and the Postmodern Condition," writes:

The end of epiphany and the exhaustion of familiar reading strategies and genre definitions call for new ways of reading and or a redefinition of both the narrative and cultural logic of short fiction. Unlike the unified, complex modernist short story, grounded in image or metaphor and moving toward revelation, many stories of the last decade and a half are marked by depthlessness, incoherence, and and ephemerality. (22)

Kennedy's work seems to extend these ideas into the realm of the short story sequence. Indeed, he recognizes that "the jarring incongruities of postmodernism and the developing implications of chaos theory" (Modern Sequences xiv) must inform our approach to sequences being written in the present era.

Kennedy's reassessment of Cathedral argues for a more extensive examination of the range of Raymond Carver's stories. Do Carver's major collections have sequential characteristics, and if so, then to what degree? This

thesis contends that two of Carver's volumes of short fiction, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976) and Cathedral, possess elements of sequential design. The former, many of whose stories revolve around a dual "thematic core," is nevertheless not a fully-formed sequence, while the latter is much more complete in its realization of the form. Kennedy's work is taken as a theoretical starting point, as it challenges us to reassess earlier sequence theory, particularly by Ingram and Mann. The application of strategies by all three critics, and others such as Robert Luscher, will demonstrate that Carver's collections are much more sequential than they have heretofore been taken to be.

ENDNOTE:

The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition (1995), by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, proposes that the term "composite novel" be used to describe texts which have heretofore been labelled short story cycles or sequences. The authors define the term in this way: "The composite novel is a literary work composed of shorter texts that--though individually complete and autonomous--are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" (2). Dunn and Morris expose some notable drawbacks to the traditional labels, and in particular the term "short story" itself. They argue that the "composite novel" rubric can more easily include works whose component "text-pieces" are not traditional stories (7). The most significant difference between the terms "composite novel" and "short story cycle" uncovered by the authors is that the former "emphasizes the integrity of the whole," while the latter "emphasizes the integrity of the parts" (5). Dunn and Morris reinforce their argument largely with reference to texts generally considered to be quite unified. Such an approach ignores recent literary contributions to the genre, however (such as Carver's Cathedral), as well as the important theoretical

modifications which they necessitate, and which are delineated by J. Gerald Kennedy. Indeed, both text and theory would seem to be leading us in the opposite direction of Dunn and Morris' chosen terminology.

CHAPTER I:

WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET, PLEASE?

The first of Raymond Carver's major short story collections, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976), may not, upon initial examination, appear to be at all sequential in nature. Carver critic Kirk Nessel writes: "One of the more striking things about Carver's first volume of stories is that as a collection it is hardly uniform in subject or voice" (9). Indeed, we are keenly aware of a writer in the process of experimentation as we read the twenty-two stories which make up the volume. There are occasions when Carver's style varies to such an extent that it belies the fact that the stories are even written by a single author. Nessel notes that "Carver ranges from the Kafkaesque expressionism of 'The Father' to the anecdotal simplicity of 'Nobody Said Anything' to the heavier, mildly Faulknerian prose of 'Sixty Acres' . . . and he ranges with similar freedom from subject to subject" (9). There are moments of humour in the collection, and some of tragic desperation. Its world is populated by factory workers, waitresses, and the unemployed,

as well as writers, artists and university students. Those stories that mention geographical location all take place on the Pacific Coast of the United States, but the volume is hardly unified by common setting: "Sixty Acres," for example, is set on the rustic Yakima Indian Reservation in Washington State, while "Jerry and Molly and Sam" takes place in Sacramento, California.

This diversity is explicitly recognized by many critics of the volume. Important links between the stories, however, are almost as immediately noted. Ewing Campbell detects an overarching presence of "motifs of alienation and encountering the other, often in the guise of the grotesque" (30). In the chapter of his 1992 book Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction devoted to Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, Campbell discusses each of the volume's stories separately. Other critics deal with the collection in a single essay, therefore implicitly recognizing some degree of unity. Arthur M. Saltzman is one of these. In Understanding Raymond Carver (1988), he prefaces his essay on the volume with this generalization: "Carver's characters are victims of anguishes they can neither brave nor name, only suffer. William Carlos Williams's diagnosis in Paterson targets them exactly: 'The language is missing them / they die also / incommunicado'" (21-22). Kirk Nessel, in his essay entitled "'This Word Love': Sexual Politics and Silence in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?," sees the collection as

being principally about "the issue of love--or, more precisely, the issue of love and its absence, and the bearing of love's absence on marriage and individual identity" (9). These and other critics clearly view Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? as a collection of related stories, as opposed to a random miscellany, but none attempts to bring the volume into the ongoing discussion of the modern short story sequence.

As was noted in the last chapter, short story sequence theorist Robert Luscher sees sequences as occupying an "expansive middle territory" between the miscellany of short stories and the traditional novel. An initial examination of Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? readily leads us to the conclusion that the volume is not located side-by-side with, say, Dubliners or Winesburg, Ohio on such a continuum. It does not have the recurring characters and places, or the "generic signals," that we expect from the "traditional" short story sequence. Yet, a close reading of the volume yields more than simply the inevitable "narrative homologies" and "commonalities of style or sensibility" which J. Gerald Kennedy attributes to any single-author collection of stories (Modern Sequences ix). There is compelling evidence that much of the collection revolves around a "thematic core" (Ingram 21), or, as Kennedy calls it, a "radical content." This core--which gives Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? at least something of the character of a sequence--consists of

two tightly-intertwined themes, or "obsessions," as Carver preferred to label his overriding concerns.

The most prominent of these two obsessions is love, or, more specifically, the ways in which ordinary people are "alternately bewildered, enraged, diminished, suffocated, isolated, and entrapped by love" (Nesset 10). Failing marriages and relationships abound in this volume. Nesset indicates that Carver's preoccupation with "love and its absence" in his first collection can be placed in a larger context:

For Carver's lovers, the politics of sex ultimately reflect a kind of larger politics, more tenuous and more ominous still: the politics of fortune and fate which, forever unseen and unheard, dictate the bleak circumstances of their lives, provoking the bafflement and dismay that is for them a daily fact of existence. Evoked by the politics of Carver's uniquely hardscrabble domesticity, the marriages of [Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?] are scaled-down models representing larger, more terrifying politics, or antipolitics—models reflecting, in human form, the arbitrariness and caprice and chaos of the world in which those marriages are rooted.

(11)

Arbitrariness, caprice and chaos are the keynotes of Carver's world in large part because many of its occupants are

profoundly affected by poverty and the insecurity which is its natural consequence. For the characters of Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, poverty and insecurity lead to feelings of overwhelming frustration, alienation, and isolation. These, in turn, help to undermine the possibility of satisfactory relationships, especially between the sexes. Feelings of alienation and isolation disrupt and damage human relationships by making communication impossible, or at best difficult.

The volume's second obsession is the failure of individuals to communicate with those who surround them, especially their spouses or partners. Lack of communication can only perpetuate the despair which too often pervades Carver's world and the relationships between its characters, and, indeed, it does so in many of the stories in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? The volume's relationships are typically marked by a deafening silence, often broken only by "a variety of misguided outbursts, neuroses, and perversions" (Saltzman 22).

Susan Garland Mann, we recall, identifies the most commonly-found organizing elements of short story sequences as being recurring characters; themes, particularly of isolation, fragmentation, or indeterminacy; statements, particularly about art; and finally place, either historical or mythical. This chapter will present a model of interpretation for Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? which

focuses on the volume's twin obsessions of "love and its absence" on the one hand, and the failure of communication, principally between spouses and partners, on the other. The relationship between this "thematic core" and the themes which Mann points out are obvious. I will look at fifteen of the volume's twenty-two stories, leaving out these seven: "Sixty Acres," "Night School," "Collectors," "What Do You Do in San Francisco?," "Put Yourself in My Shoes," "Why, Honey?" and "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes."

Of the fifteen stories, six will be shown to possess a special structural relationship: "The Idea," "What's in Alaska?," "The Student's Wife," "The Ducks," "What is it?" and "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" Of these, the first five are strikingly similar not only in their treatment of the volume's "thematic core," but also in their patterns and conclusions. The sixth--the volume's concluding story--reverses the pattern established by the others, with significant effects on our reading of the entire collection. In his "Poetics" essay, J. Gerald Kennedy suggests that "every collection, especially those by a single author, may be expected to reveal elemental narrative structures, resembling grammatical chains, which generate the individual stories and account for similarities and differences among them" (23). The above six stories reveal a "narrative deep structure" at the heart of the collection, a feature which Kennedy indicates as one of the most significant aspects of

the modern short story sequence (22).

Before proceeding to this "narrative deep structure," however, I will first examine nine stories which, despite being fairly dissimilar from one another in their individual narrative patterns, nevertheless prominently display their author's two main obsessions, the "thematic core" of the volume. These are "Fat," "Neighbors," "They're Not Your Husband," "Are You A Doctor?," "The Father," "Nobody Said Anything," "Jerry and Molly and Sam," "Signals," and "How About This?". Particular attention will be paid to "The Father," a two-page fragment which, when read in the context of the volume as a whole, serves to compact and crystallise the volume's main obsessions.

The collection's opening story, "Fat," solidly establishes both of the authorial obsessions which dominate Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? In it, the waitress-narrator recounts, to both her friend Rita and us, her curious identification with an obese customer seated at her table one evening. Although the exact nature and cause of this identification ultimately remain mysterious to us, we can at least speculate that the fat man's gentlemanly politeness, "festive" personality (Campbell 13), and exotic quality--demonstrated particularly in his comic use of the royal "we"--represent for the narrator an escape from the dreariness of life she is used to. His behaviour certainly contrasts with the party of four businessmen seated at

another table, twice mentioned as being "very demanding" (Please 3, 5).

After the encounter, the narrator's boyfriend Rudy only refers to the man as "some fatty" (Please 7). Indeed, the identification of the narrator with the fat man throws into sharp relief the inadequacy of the former's relationship with Rudy. We recognize this initial manifestation of the theme of love's absence most explicitly when the couple are in bed together:

I get into bed and move clear over to the edge and lie there on my stomach. But right away, as soon as he turns off the light and gets into bed, Rudy begins. I turn on my back and relax some, though it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all. (8)

The narrator cannot, or will not, communicate to Rudy her identification with the fat man--this failure is merely the first of the volume's many depictions of its author's second obsession. When Rudy recounts his own childhood experience with two fat boys, the narrator "can't think of anything to say" (Please 8). Although she tries to relate her experience to Rita, she ultimately stops short, further isolating herself:

That's a funny story, Rita says, but I can see

she doesn't know what to make of it.

I feel depressed. But I won't go into it with her. I've already told her too much. (8)

Some critics, for instance Ewing Campbell, see the narrator's connection with the fat man as a renewing event (13). In fact, the narrator's inability or unwillingness to communicate fully the interaction and its implications suggests something else: "Her inarticulateness stakes out the limits of her growth of consciousness" (Saltzman 24). The final lines of the story ("It is August. My life is going to change. I feel it."), while superficially positive, have a false ring to them, especially in light of the narrator's "depression," admitted to only a few lines earlier. The passivity of the sentence "My life is going to change" (as opposed to, say, "I am going to change my life"), which echoes the narrator's passivity during sex earlier in the story, is seen by Saltzman to be another negative sign (24). Finally, August seems hardly the month for positive transformation, prefacing as it does the decline associated with autumn. As "Fat" concludes, we are left with little faith that the narrator's life will improve, despite the potential for growth and revitalization that her identification with another holds out.

"Fat" is followed by "Neighbors," "a tale of marriage in the process of diminishing" (Nesset 11-12). Although Bill and Arlene Miller are described in the story's opening

sentence as "a happy couple," it becomes clear that the opposite is true as we observe them taking sexual pleasure, separately, in the empty apartment of their more affluent neighbors, which they have agreed to look after. Like the narrator in "Fat," Bill and Arlene "look outward, imagining themselves as others, seeking alternate, more attractive selves" (Nesset 12). They never tell each other what they are experiencing in the neighbouring apartment, and, when they find themselves locked out of it as the story concludes, can only hold each other in silence, "[bracing] themselves" (Please 16) before the inevitable collapse. "Neighbors" clearly shares a "thematic core" with the preceding story. Like the empty relationship between Rudy and the narrator in "Fat," Bill and Arlene's marriage is depicted by Carver as having been drained, at some point previous to the story's action, of whatever initial mutual passion and understanding it might have possessed. Paralleling the opening story's communicative paralysis is "Neighbors"' combination of marital failure with a striking inability or unwillingness by its protagonists to communicate meaningfully. The reader recognizes that Bill and Arlene's silence can only serve to hasten a complete marital disintegration.

The collection's fourth story brings us back to a nondescript coffee shop like that in which most of the action in "Fat" takes place. "They're Not Your Husband" centres on Earl Ober, who is "between jobs as a salesman" (Please 22).

One night, after he has been drinking, he goes to the restaurant where his wife Doreen works, and overhears two customers commenting on her weight. The next day he "sells" her on the idea of a diet. Unemployed, drinking heavily, and reliant on Doreen's income, Ober is clearly no longer in control of his own life. His reaction to his predicament comes in the form of a callous attempt to control Doreen's weight--she has "suddenly [become] a problem to be corrected" (Saltzman 28). The attempt eventually backfires on him when he becomes the object of strangers' derision as the story concludes.

In his "Poetics" essay, J. Gerald Kennedy notes that the juxtaposition of stories may be used to highlight differences as well as similarities (17). We note some interesting results if we juxtapose "They're Not Your Husband" and "Fat." Carver uses the same tools in both stories: the main characters are reacting to an encounter with strangers in a restaurant. Images of weight are central to each--thinness in the former and fatness in the latter. The stories are, most importantly, connected by a common "thematic core": both depict love's absence, specifically revealed in this pair of stories as a description of women caught in relationships in which their male partner has no interest in their well-being. In both instances, meaningful communication has ceased--if it ever existed to begin with. The two stories are not completely parallel, however. In

fact, it is how they contrast that makes the relationship between "Fat" and "They're Not Your Husband" most interesting. "Fat" suggests at least the possibility that an interaction with "the other" can have beneficial consequences, representing as it does a potential escape from communicative paralysis (although, as we have seen, the narrator's potential for positive transformation is, arguably, far from realized). The analogous interaction with "the other" in "They're Not Your Husband" has overwhelmingly negative consequences, leading as it does to a steady erosion of Earl Ober's marriage as his wife becomes more and more physically emaciated. In short, when the two stories are examined side-by-side in light of both their unities and disunities, we are presented with a somewhat ambiguous, but ultimately gloomy, vision of the interaction with "the other": if the former story holds out perhaps some hope, the latter overwhelms and crushes it.

"Are You a Doctor?" again presents the possibility of a connection between its main character and a stranger--the connection is not ultimately forged, however. This failure to escape isolation through meaningful communication is once again set against a backdrop of marital erosion. The story opens with the solitary presence of Arnold Breit, who is forced to spend many nights at home waiting for his wife to phone: "She phoned--late . . . after a few drinks--each night when she was out of town" (Please 31). When the phone

rings, however, Breit finds himself talking not to his wife, but to a female stranger. After another phone conversation the next night, Breit makes the decision to visit the stranger after she begs him to do so.

As he approaches the strange woman's apartment, Arnold is "stalked by fear" (Nesset 17). He is afraid of the possibility that he may commit an act of infidelity. He thinks of his honeymoon, very likely the only emblem of his marriage he has left to hold on to, and almost balks: "He remembered the hotel in Luxembourg, the five flights he and his wife had climbed so many years ago. He felt a sudden pain in his side . . ." (Please 35). Breit's other, contrary, fear is that he may not get the chance to meet the stranger: when he leaves the telephone for a moment earlier in the story, to light a cigar, he returns "half afraid she might be off the line" (33).

The result of Breit's indecision is the story's anticlimax. Breit does meet the stranger, Clara Holt, but their conversation, typical of many which indicate the volume's "thematic core," is profoundly frustrating to the reader in its emptiness, despite the obvious potential it holds:

"Then there's nothing?" he said.

"No. I mean yes." She shook her head. "What you said, I mean. Nothing". (Please 39)

When Breit returns home and his wife calls, it becomes clear

that the meeting with Clara has only served to distance Breit further from his wife: "Are you there, Arnold?" she said. "You don't sound like yourself." Saltzman notes that "Carver leaves [the couple] on the verge of inevitable distance from one another" (32). The failure of Arnold and Clara to connect fully, despite the obvious potential in their meeting, leaves the former more alone than ever. Indeed, he seems profoundly alienated even from himself as the story concludes.

"Are You a Doctor?" is followed by what is perhaps the strangest story in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? "The Father" is barely two pages long and reads essentially like a fragment from some dark fairy tale. It presents a snapshot-like image of the female members of a family looking at their newborn baby and trying to determine whom he most resembles. They conclude that he looks like his father, who sits alone in another room. That realization leads to this exchange between two of the daughters:

"But who does Daddy look like?" Phyllis asked.

"Who does Daddy look like?" Alice repeated, and they all at once looked through to the kitchen where the father was sitting at the table with his back to them.

"Why, nobody!" Phyllis said and began to cry a little. (Please 42)

The story ends a few lines later with this chilling image:

"[The father] had turned around in his chair and his face was white and without expression" (42).

The stories so far examined all essentially revolve around a "thematic core" comprised of the issue of "love and its absence," and a related "motif of alienation." "The Father" compresses these two obsessions of Carver's into the single, horrible image of the father, seated alone and figuratively distant from his family. As the women in the story become aware, and make him aware, that he looks like "nobody", the father finds himself, like Arnold Breit, utterly displaced from both his family and himself. The fear inherent to such a state is, in varying degrees, manifest in each of the stories which precede "The Father," as well as other stories later in the volume, but is never as grotesquely realized.

The above reading is grounded in "The Father" 's presence within what Kennedy calls the "textual structure" of the collection ("Poetics" 15). Other readings are obviously possible, especially since this story, more so than any other in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, is characterized by what it does not say. Regardless of how we ultimately interpret "The Father," our attempt to fill in its 'gaps' will almost certainly be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by whether or not we come to the story on its own, or as part of a larger whole. Recall that in Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century,

Forrest Ingram writes: "A short story cycle [is] a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (19). The reader of "The Father" is given so little information to go on that he is very likely to call on the overall patterns at least seemingly present in the rest of the collection to aid in the interpreting of the story. It is through "The Father," therefore, that Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? appears in one of its most sequential lights. As we shall see, "The Father" takes on another layer of complexity when we arrive at the collection's final story.

"Nobody Said Anything," like "The Father," comes at the theme of "love and its absence" from the child's point of view. It is, however, considerably longer and more detailed than "The Father," or indeed any story we have examined thus far. It opens with the child-narrator overhearing his parents argue. After they both go to work, he explores various adolescent escapes from reality--television, a science fiction novel, and masturbation. He then goes fishing at a creek nearby his house. Through an act of teamwork with another boy that contrasts with his parents' earlier bickering, he catches and brings home a bloated, grotesque fish, or rather the half of it which belongs to him after it is divided with the other boy. He clearly hopes to

impress his parents with the trophy, and perhaps distract them from the argument which they have resumed, but instead its bizarre appearance only further enrages them--they order him to throw it in the garbage. The final lines of the story leave the adolescent alone with his catch, but imbue both with a poignant nobility that seems to signify the hope for reconciliation they had represented:

I went back outside. I looked into the creel.
 What was there looked silver under the porch light.
 What was there filled the creel.

I lifted him out. I held him. I held that half
 of him. (Please 61)

Part of the moment's poignancy derives from our understanding that despite his best efforts, the boy cannot possibly restore equilibrium to his parents' relationship. Only they can do that through constructive dialogue. It is once again a lack of such dialogue which exacerbates the story's despairing vision of love's absence.

"Jerry and Molly and Sam" is one of a pair of stories, within the group of nine "thematic core" stories, which somewhat jarringly treat the two obsessions of the "thematic core" with black humour. It centres on Al, who, beset by potential crises on all sides--the possibility he may get laid off, rent and car payments, and, not least of all, the fact that he is having an affair--decides, in what he sees as a moment of great clarity, to take control of things by

getting rid of the family dog. In keeping with the volume's previous visions of a failure of marital dialogue, we sense Al's real problem is his complete isolation from his wife and family, and even his secret lover--it is noted that "his life had become a maze, one lie overlaid upon another until he was not sure he could untangle them if he had to" (Please 156). For all this the blame is put on Suzy the dog.

After he covertly drops the pet off in a faraway neighbourhood, he goes to the apartment of the woman with whom he is having an affair. He does make an attempt to communicate his anxiety to her, but by this time, having stopped at two bars and a liquor store on the way, he is too drunk to succeed in the endeavour. She is more concerned with squeezing his blackheads than with consoling him. He then goes home to his family, who are naturally distressed by the fact that the dog is missing. From then on Al is convinced that everything depends on retrieving the dog. The sense of impending disaster that we experience at the end of so many of the volume's stories in fact propels "Jerry and Molly and Sam" from start to finish, and is its chief comic device. There is an underlying note of tragedy to the story, however, as we detect that Al's life and marriage are merely two more failures in the series we have been tracking. The failure of Al's marriage, combined with his inability or unwillingness to attempt to repair it through truthful communication, represent another revelation of the two

obsessions which constitute the "thematic core" of Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?

"Signals," like "Jerry and Molly and Sam," employs dark humour in its depiction of a couple on the brink of disaster.

Wayne and Caroline's attempt to repair their relationship by having dinner at an expensive French restaurant backfires when Wayne discovers how out of his depth he is amid the elegance of Aldo's, and how far he is from a reconciliation with Caroline. Their inability to communicate with the new French waiter is echoed by their failure to relay their fears to each other. As they leave the restaurant, Wayne is determined to salvage something of his dignity: he expresses doubt that Aldo, who has been flirting with Caroline, ever knew Lana Turner, as Caroline had earlier claimed.

"How About This?" begins with a couple setting out on a new road: unusually, for this volume, they are actively trying to change their lives (Saltzman 60). Harry, a writer, and Emily, an artist, have made a seemingly clean break from their lives in San Francisco, and are destined for an isolated house in northwestern Washington. Their vaguely expressed hope is to "make a more honest life somewhere in the country" (Please 187). Disappointment sets in when they arrive to find the house dilapidated. Nervous and tentative, they debate whether or not they should stay. Their examination of the house becomes, in effect, an examination of their relationship (Saltzman 61): "He rapped on the walls

near the front door. "Solid. A solid foundation. If you have a solid foundation, that's the main thing'" (188). The problem with this examination is, once again, a "ritualistic avoidance" of genuine communication (Saltzman 41). The couple do talk, but in a dangerously guarded and tentative way. After commenting on the foundation, Harry avoids eye contact, for "[Emily] was shrewd and might have read something from his eyes" (188). Later he says "Let's . . . let's not let any of it get us down, okay?," to which Emily replies: "I wish you'd just be quiet'" (189).

In the story's second equation of the sexual and the material, Harry eventually discovers, despite his initial assessment of the "foundation," that he has no confidence in either his relationship with Emily or the sturdiness of the homestead: "He suddenly recalled the mattress in the kitchen. He understood that it made him afraid. He tried to imagine Emily walking the big rafter in the barn. But that made him afraid too" (Please 193). He decides he can never live in the new house, and it is clear the couple will soon be withdrawing to the world they had, with great hope, left only days earlier. The house will remain dilapidated. As the story ends, the couple, like Bill and Arlene Miller at the end of "Neighbors," fearfully brace themselves: "Harry, we have to love each other," [Emily] said. "We'll just have to love each other," she said" (194).

The above nine stories yield a clear "thematic core"

based upon two obsessions: the breakdown of relationships, combined with and reinforced by the failure of characters to initiate reparative communication. Such a "thematic core" is strong indication--as Ingram and Kennedy argue--of a short story volume's sequential design. In addition to these nine stories, there are, embedded at intervals within the volume, six stories which collectively represent its "narrative deep structure"; these six stories resemble one another not only in their thematic concerns, but also in their narrative patterns and conclusions. The "thematic core" of these stories is the same as that of each of the above nine stories: the sexual relationships they reveal are all on the verge of breakdown, and meaningful communication between partners has essentially ceased. Carver goes a step further in these stories, however, depicting the terror felt by characters involved in an almost completely disintegrated relationship. The crisis between partners in each of these stories ends with one falling asleep, leaving the other totally and finally isolated as he or she faces a single, horrible image or state. Fear and loneliness, sometimes only hinted at in the above nine stories, are keenly realized in the narrative pattern of the dark "inner core" stories of Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? The collection's final story also displays the same "narrative deep structure," yet "upsets" the pattern established by the other five. This discontinuity adds another layer of complexity to the whole

volume.

The first of these six stories, "The Idea," is virtually a parallel to "Neighbors," which immediately precedes it. It depicts a couple who, like the Millers, experience sexual titillation as a result of an outside source. The narrator and her partner, Vern, secretly observe their neighbour as he stands at his wife's window watching her undress. While the neighbors presumably get sexual satisfaction through their voyeurism, this is not the case for Vern and the narrator. Instead, the act of watching makes them "jumpy," and they channel their sexual appetites into other, solitary, acts: eating and watching television. Indeed, their sexual, and more general, isolation from each other echoes the situation in "Neighbors": they are unable or unwilling to communicate why they repeatedly watch the couple next door. The result is the narrator's terrifying encounter with an infestation of ants after Vern has gone to bed. Naturally, the narrator is unable or unwilling to tell Vern about the ants, although she clearly wants to: "I'd wanted to tell Vern about the ants" (Please 21).

"What's In Alaska?" centres on the "ritualistic avoidance" of communication between spouses Carl and Mary after the latter announces she may be getting a new job in Fairbanks, Alaska. They are clearly anxious about this new development in their lives, but avoid discussion of it, instead venting their fears in a number of "misguided

outbursts, neuroses and perversions" when they visit, and smoke marijuana with, their friends Jack and Helen. Shortly after they arrive at Jack and Helen's, Mary accuses Carl of being "on a little bumner" (Please 80). Carl takes particular notice of interactions between Mary and Jack, and becomes increasingly agitated by them. Eventually his anxiety shifts to a new pair of shoes he's just bought, after he spills soda on them. Carl and Mary are careful to avoid the subject which truly bothers them. Carl does mention it once, but only vaguely articulates his fear: "Mary, what am I going to do up there?" (84). Mary does not reply.

After leaving their friends' house, Carl's shoe continues to bother him obsessively: "He could feel the dampness in that shoe" (Please 91). Meanwhile, Mary yearns for further distraction: "`When we get home, Carl, I want to be fucked, talked to, diverted. Divert me, Carl. I need to be diverted tonight'" (91). In fact, she quickly falls asleep after they get home. Carl then notices something "vaguely predatory" in the darkness:

He kept staring and thought he saw it again, a pair of small eyes. His heart turned. He blinked and kept staring. He leaned over to look for something to throw. He picked up one of his shoes. He sat straight up and held the shoe with both hands. He heard her snoring and set his teeth. He waited. He waited for it to move once more, to make the

slightest move. (93)

This concluding scene is clearly reminiscent of the final moments of "The Idea," after the narrator in that story discovers the ants: one spouse sleeps, leaving the other alone to bear a vaguely-realized horror. This narrative pattern is more fully explored, and more terrifyingly achieved, in "The Student's Wife" than in either of the above stories.

"The Student's Wife" directly explores the problem which Kirk Nessel outlines at the beginning of his "Sexual Politics and Silence" essay. The story portrays a couple who can recall the romance of the early stages of their relationship, a romance crushed by "the arbitrariness, caprice and chaos" of their subsequent, poverty-ridden lives. It opens with its protagonists, Mike and Nan, in bed together--Mike is reading the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke to his wife, but gets sleepy. Nan, her mind filled with escapist thoughts of "caravans just setting out from walled cities and bearded men in robes" (Please 122), is restless, and wants Mike to stay awake. Among the tactics she employs is an attempt to get Mike to list the things he likes and dislikes. First she gives her list:

"I like staying up late at night and then staying in bed the next morning. I wish we could do that all the time, not just once in a while . . . I'd like to go dancing at least once a week. I'd like

to be able to buy the kids nice clothes every time they need it I'd like to stop moving around every year, or every other year. Most of all I'd like us both just to live a good honest life without having to worry about money and bills and things like that". (128)

Her attempt to elicit similar admissions from Mike is tersely cut off when he says: "I wish you'd leave me alone, Nan" (128).

Mike falls asleep shortly thereafter, but Nan, kept awake by the rhythmic monotony of her partner's breathing, gets up and restlessly seeks distraction. She stays awake, anxious and crying all night, only to realize fully the horror of her insomnia when the sun rises:

The sky grew whiter, the light expanding rapidly up From behind the hills. Except for the times she had been up with one or another of the children (which she did not count because she had never looked outside, only hurried back to bed or to the kitchen), she had seen few sunrises in her life and those when she was little. She knew that none of them had been like this. Not in pictues nor in any book she had read had she learned a sunrise was so terrible as this. (Please 131)

The story concludes with Nan bearing the image of a "terrible sunrise" in solitude, desperately yearning for some sort of

communion:

She wet her lips with a sticking sound and got down on her knees. She put her hands out on the bed.

"God," she said. "God, will you help us God?" she said. (131)

Arthur Saltzman notes that one of Rilke's poems, "The Archaic Torso of Apollo," ends with the line: "You have to change your life." Will Nan's life change? With a husband to whom she cannot communicate her fears, the possibility for positive renewal seems as unlikely as that presented at the end of "Fat," which, we recall, ends with a hollow-sounding variation on, or perhaps reply to, the line from Rilke ("My life is going to change.").

"The Ducks" is the next in the "narrative deep structure" of stories, whose structural pattern sees, in each case, one member of a dysfunctional couple completely isolated to bear a terrible anxiety while the other sleeps. Its crisis is the death of the male partner's boss during a work shift one evening. The event prompts his unnamed wife, suddenly reminded of life's transience, to initiate sex. The husband is unreceptive, however:

He tried to think how much he loved her or if he loved her. He could hear her breathing but he could also hear the rain. They lay there like this.

She said, "If you don't want to, it's all right."

"It's not that," he said, not knowing what he meant. (Please 183)

After his wife falls asleep, the husband tries to focus on an upcoming holiday in Reno which the couple have planned. His mind becomes flooded with images of gambling:

He tried to think of the slots and the way the dice clicked and how they looked turning over under the lights. He tried to hear the sound the roulette ball made as it skimmed around the gleaming wheel. He tried to concentrate on the wheel. He looked and looked and listened and listened and heard the saws and the machinery slowing down, coming to a stop. (Please 183)

The sudden and seemingly arbitrary death of a co-worker is surely part of the explanation for these thoughts of chance and fate. We sense as well, however, that the death has prompted the husband to reevaluate his marriage and his own happiness--in other words, his standing in life's game of chance. As we noted above, Kirk Nessel links the volume's "politics of sex" to a larger "politics of fortune and fate."

While he does not deal directly with the story in his essay, it should be noted that "The Ducks" in fact makes the link in a more explicit way than any other piece in the volume.

Thoughts of Reno finally give way to a fear which we

have now seen, in various guises, several times. The husband thinks he hears something outside, but his wife is asleep and unaware of what her partner fears: "`Hon, wake up,' he whispered. But she only shuddered and moved farther to her own side. She kept on sleeping. `Wake up,' he whispered. `I hear something outside' (Please 184). Like the narrator of "The Idea," Carl in "What's in Alaska?," and Nan in "The Student's Wife", the husband is left to bear, in isolation, a vague, unnamed fear.

The couple at the centre of "What Is It?," Leo and Toni, are on the brink of financial disaster: their bankruptcy hearing is just two days away. The couple's monetary insolvency parallels a breakdown in their marriage, and indeed, the two failures reinforce one another, as Nessel observes: "conjugal proximity teams up with bad fortune to destroy what is left" (20). As the story begins, Toni is leaving for the evening to sell the couple's convertible. When we learn that she has committed adultery with the dealer who buys the car, we come to understand that Toni has in fact "sold" all that is left of the couple, material and spiritual.

While she is gone, Leo drinks heavily, and even considers suicide. He is unable to understand how he has reached this point. Like Nan in "The Student's Wife," he finds himself desperate for the spiritual communion his relationship lacks as he cries out for help: "A news program

begins--it's ten o'clock--and he says, 'God, what in God's name has gone wrong?' and goes to the kitchen to return with more Scotch" (Please 213). Leo's horrible solitude is finally interrupted by Toni's telephone call to announce the sale of the car. We sense that meaningful conversation between the two at this point--before adultery has been committed--may be vital. The telephone dialogue however, is as stilted and unsatisfying as that in "Are You a Doctor?" When the telephone rings again, there is "only a dial tone" (216). Leo's isolation is now complete.

When Toni is dropped off the next morning by the car dealer, Leo makes a faint attempt to confront the man, but instead finds himself confronted with questions he cannot answer: "'What is it you want?' the man says 'What is it?'" (Please 217). Leo is silent. Later he gets into bed with Toni, who is sleeping. The story ends with a grotesque metaphor of the baffling, and randomly drawn, roads of life: "He runs his fingers over her hip and feels the stretch marks there. They are like roads, and he traces them in her flesh They run everywhere in her flesh, dozens, perhaps hundreds of them" (218). Leo and Toni's road appears to have come to an end. The final image of the story transports us to an earlier moment when, with infinite promise, the road had begun: "He remembers waking up the morning after they bought the car, seeing it, there in the drive, in the sun, gleaming" (218).

The last of the six stories which constitute the volume's "narrative deep structure," "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?," is also the collection's final story. The situation it presents--a couple in crisis--is familiar. How it principally differs from all the stories thus far examined is in the degree to which the reader is made aware of the background to the story's events. We are introduced to Ralph Wyman, the central character, and read of his progression through young adulthood as a university student and, after graduation, a school teacher. Two moments during this period seem particularly significant. One is Ralph's feeling, after taking courses in philosophy and literature, that he is "on the brink of some kind of huge discovery about himself" (Please 227). But, we are told, it never comes. He does find inspiration under the tutelage of a literature professor, Dr. Maxwell, and then meets the woman he eventually marries, Marian Ross. The second moment comes the night before the couple's wedding, when both he and Marian "[pledge] to preserve forever the excitement and the mystery of marriage" (229).

In keeping with the volume's "thematic core," marital bliss does not last. The story differs, however, in that we are witness to the moment at which a critical gulf between the couple opens. One afternoon during their honeymoon in Mexico, Ralph observes, from a distance, Marian leaning over a balustrade, sexually alluring and almost exotic. He

experiences "an intensely dramatic moment into which Marian could be fitted but he could not" (Please 229). Marian's intense sexuality scares and isolates Ralph, and, furthermore, "suggests the rupture to come" (Saltzman 69).

Ralph's insecurities about his position within the sexual world of his wife are confirmed on the fateful evening which is the story's focus. During a quiet moment after their children are put to bed, Marian confesses to a sexual liaison with a male friend, an event which, to some degree, Ralph has always known about and feared. He becomes enraged:

"`Christ!' The word leaped out of him. `But you've always been that way, Marian!'" (Please 235). As Saltzman puts it:

"Before him once again is that strange, disconcerting woman whom he had watched on the balcony" (70). Ralph's perceived isolation seems complete to him as he connects this moment with the earlier one in Mexico.

The night of drunken excess which follows resurrects a way of life which was usual for Ralph during the period in which he felt "on the brink of some kind of huge discovery about himself" (Saltzman 70). After it is over, he returns home, seemingly farther away than ever to such a revelation.

Seated alone at the kitchen table, we are brought back to the unrecognizable man in "The Father." Indeed, the connections between that most fragmentary of the volume's stories and the final story speak for themselves:

[Ralph] heard the children stirring. He sat up

tried to smile as they came into the kitchen.

"Daddy, Daddy," they said, running to him with their little bodies.

"Tell us a story, Daddy," his son said, getting into his lap.

"He can't tell us a story," his daughter said. "It's too early for a story. Isn't it, Daddy?"

"What's on your face, Daddy?" his son said, pointing.

"Let me see!" his daughter said. "Let me see, Daddy."

"Poor Daddy," his son said.

"What did you do to your face, Daddy?" his daughter said.

"It's nothing" Ralph said. "It's all right, sweetheart. Now you get down now, Robert, I hear your mother". (Please 249)

Ralph's face has been bruised after an attack by a hoodlum, but his child's question ("What did you do to your face, Daddy?"), invoking a similar question in "The Father" ("Who does Daddy look like?"), suggests the degree to which he has been displaced from his former self by the night's events.

Juxtaposing the story's conclusion against those of the five stories discussed above reveals a significant variation--indeed an inversion--of the recurring end-pattern present in the above five "inner core" stories. Ralph gets into bed

with Marian, only she is not asleep. They make love, and in so doing seem to bridge the gap that the previous night has torn open. The effect of this re-connection on Ralph concludes the volume: ". . . he turned to her. He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep, and he was still turning, marvelling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him" (Please 251). Commenting on this last sentence, Nessel notes that

through verbal repetition--especially of the gerund--Carver suggests the kinds of possibility residing in the "impossible," emphasizing that the road to recovery is part of the journey, too. He also suggests, ironically, that the remedy for such dis-ease lies in its cause. For Ralph and Marian, sex will now restore, at least in part, what sex has earlier undertaken to destroy. (25)

Ralph does not know where his "turning" will take him. As his daughter points out, it is, for the moment, "too early for a story." We clearly sense, however, that he, and Marian, are not at the end of a road, but at a new beginning.

The majority of the stories we have looked at end with couples more alienated from each other than ever, and sometimes clearly on the brink of disaster. Sexual politics, often working in tandem with a larger politics of fate, and combined with an inability or unwillingness to communicate, lead to displacement from the partner and family, as well as

displacement from the former self. The man at the end of "The Father," isolated from and unrecognizable to his family, is the volume's single-most compact and intense recognition of these displacements. Yet, the volume ends ambiguously, but intriguingly, by suggesting that the final story's displacement (and, by implication, displacements that have come before) may in fact be a positive transformation. "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" ends on a note that suggests a terrible storm has been weathered, and that life, although difficult and confusing in its newness, can now continue. The final story's seemingly positive end cannot possibly negate all that has come before in the volume, however, but it does make it more difficult to pin down the collection's overall world-view.

As has been noted, seven of the stories in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? do not chiefly concern themselves with the "thematic core" evident in the above fifteen. The alienation which Lee Waites, an American Indian, suffers in "Sixty Acres" does not stem from marital disintegration, but rather originates in the story's "backdrop of racial dispossession" (Saltzman 37). The action in each of "Night School" and "Collectors" takes place after the narrator's marriage has ended, contrary to the main current of stories in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? which occur before marital collapses. In "What Do You Do in San Francisco?," we witness an apparent marital disintegration through the eyes

of the postman Henry Robinson, but the story is actually more concerned with Robinson's use of his observations to validate his bourgeois philosophies. "Put Yourself in My Shoes" is a story of how an experience with "the other," in this case manifest in "a couple of brusque philistines" (Saltzman 52), enables a writer to discover his next story and overcome artistic inertia. "Why, Honey?," which comes in the form of a confessional letter, reveals the disintegration of a mother and son's relationship resulting from the latter's deception. Finally, "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes" is a tender and optimistic story about a profound moment of connection between a father and son.

With seven stories in which the volume's overriding obsessions of relationship disintegration and non-communication are not particularly evident, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? cannot be considered a traditional short story sequence. In the remaining fifteen stories, however, these obsessions are pervasive, and in one of these fifteen, "The Father," are terrifyingly distilled. There exists an inner core of six stories within the fifteen in which the volume's obsessions manifest themselves in very similar narratorial patterns, giving way as they do to final, fearful images of isolation. The last story in this "narrative deep structure"--and the final one of the volume--adds a layer of complexity and ambiguity to the collection's vision: despite a special connection with "The Father"--the most unyielding

of the volume's linked stories--the final story reverses the pattern established by the conclusions to the other five. It is clear that Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, while not a traditional sequence, is no random miscellany. When Carver came to write Cathedral, however, the "sequence potential" manifest in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? evolved into a form that we can recognize as a modern short story sequence.

CHAPTER II:

CATHEDRAL

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? bears at least some signs of sequential design. Roughly two-thirds of its stories reveal a definite "thematic core." There are indications that it possesses a "narrative deep structure" which involves a half-dozen stories. Carver's 1983 collection, Cathedral, however, is undoubtedly a much more fully-formed short story sequence. The issues and problems surrounding communication, important in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, are vital to Cathedral, and indeed form the engine of its operation as a sequence. In each of Cathedral's twelve stories, the theme of communication is front and centre. The volume is Raymond Carver's fullest--yet most ambiguous--treatment of this most central authorial

obsession. Carver's chosen theme manifests itself through a structural progression which runs the full course of the volume. Before proceeding to an analysis of Cathedral's sequential vision, however, we must review the critical context, and particularly J. Gerald Kennedy's groundbreaking study of the volume as a sequence.

Cathedral is more generally discussed in terms of the interconnectedness of its stories than is Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? In his 1992 study entitled Reading Raymond Carver, Randolph Paul Runyon explicitly refers to Cathedral as a story sequence, and relates the stories' interdependence on one another to the act of collaboration at the end of the title story: "Like the protagonists of ["Cathedral"], its stories ride each other, depend on each other, collaborate with each other to create together what they could not have done by themselves" (185). Runyon suggests that Carver himself may have indirectly hinted at the connections among the collection's stories in a 1982 interview which appears in Conversations with Raymond Carver (1990). Actually referring to the cooperation between writer and editor, Carver says: "This is a far-fetched analogy, but in a way it's like building a fantastic cathedral. The main thing is to get the work of art

together. You don't know who built those cathedrals, but they're there" (23).

Runyon's study is noteworthy just by virtue of the fact that it is the first significant critical work which labels Cathedral a short story sequence. Its detailed analysis of the volume, however, fails to move much beyond links and associations between neighboring pairs of stories, and certainly does not indicate an overarching sequential vision. Kirk Nessel, in an essay entitled "Insularity and Self-Enlargement in Raymond Carver's Cathedral," collected in The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study (1995), implies that such a vision can be uncovered, although he does not overtly link the collection to short story sequence theory. Nessel observes two contrary patterns at work throughout the volume. The first is a "tendency toward insularity" by which Cathedral's characters "seal themselves off from the world, walling out threatening forces even as they wall themselves in, retreating destructively into the claustrophobic inner enclosures of self" (52). At odds to this tendency are instances in which some characters, "pushing insularity the other way . . . attempt to throw off the entrapping nets and, in a few cases, almost succeed" (52).

Nesset's conclusions are to some extent echoed in J.G. Kennedy's ground-breaking 1995 study of the volume, in which he presents Cathedral--as well as Sherwood Anderson's classic sequence Winesburg, Ohio--as being representative of a kind of story sequence in the tradition of Joyce's Dubliners and Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Furs, in which an "analogy between communities and story sequences becomes inescapable" (Modern Sequences 194). As we have noted, Kennedy argues that the breaks between stories in these two volumes--what he calls a lack of "narratorial bridges"--undermine any collaborative structures we may discover: "These breaches remind us that . . . characters in story sequences, unlike those in novels, rarely meet or become conscious of one another and thus remain unaware of the ways in which their situations may be similar" (196). Ultimately, "in a genre marked by formal breaks that relentlessly signal social differences or psychological distances, gaps between characters can never be entirely masked by the semblance of community" (197).

Kennedy begins his detailed analysis of Cathedral with an attack on the line of criticism, developed by Ewing Campbell and others, which seems to view the collection as a depiction of collaboration and hence positive

transformation. The first major weakness of this positive view of Cathedral, he notes, is that it focuses too much attention on "A Small, Good Thing"--and especially its relationship with "The Bath"--at the expense of a closer study of the rest of the volume's stories: "The differences between the two narratives illustrate--perhaps a little too neatly--the change in sentiment ascribed to the author of Cathedral" (204). While the ending of "A Small, Good Thing", apparently a kind of holy communion, finds reflection in a few other "moments of sensitivity" in the volume, the overall picture presented by a close reading of all twelve stories is a good deal more pessimistic. After all, Kennedy notes, "more than half the narratives present skeptical treatments of faltering relationships, and even most of the 'hopeful' stories portray disintegrating, if not moribund, marriages" (205).

Kennedy then implicitly suggests another key weakness in the arguments in favour of a positive reading of Cathedral, namely that they seem to ignore the "gaps or breaks" between stories, which reflect "a pervasive sense of detachment and dissociation" (205) throughout the volume. These breaks must, Kennedy argues, frame any brief moments of hope within an overall picture of human isolation: "The

relationships that Carver portrays in Cathedral typically unfold as fleeting encounters in lives still largely devoid of communal attachments" (205).

Kennedy goes on to develop a possible model of how Cathedral operates as a story sequence. He notes first that the volume opens with three quite bleak stories ("Feathers," "Chef's House," and "Preservation") which "variously treat the disintegration of marital relationships" (206). These are followed by six stories that Kennedy calls "the interior" of the collection. The interior is itself framed by two stories, "The Compartment" and "The Train," concerning railroad journeys by protagonists who seem deeply isolated from their respective environments. Immediately within the framing stories are "A Small, Good Thing" and "Where I'm Calling From," stories that Kennedy admits are "generally affirmative tales of sharing and understanding" (207). Finally, between these are two largely negative stories "that thematize escape and deception," "Vitamins" and "Careful." Kennedy argues that Carver's "deliberate pairing of consonant elements within a contrastive progression" works to create a total effect which is "precariously uncertain" (207).

According to Kennedy, the profound uncertainty that we are left with after reading our way through the interior of Carver's Cathedral pervades each of the final three stories. In "Fever," the brief connection between Mrs. Webster and Carlyle seems to be seriously undermined by the "linguistic abyss" that is Carlyle's present, telephone-based, relationship with his wife. Similarly, in "The Bridle," the moment of confessional union between Marge and Betty is overwhelmed by "the sense of despair," and longing for escape which characterize both their lives. Kennedy finally notes that the volume's last story, from which it takes its name, also seems deeply uncertain in its effect, despite the prodigious quantity of criticism that sees it as being an unambiguous portrait of human communion. There is much evidence of "marital discontent" throughout the story, and this makes our reading of the story's final pages at best ambiguous: "the story's outcome is by no means clear, and the gestures of sympathy that briefly connect characters throughout the collection stand in contrast to scenes of misunderstanding that produce various ruptures and divisions" (209).

In addition to uncovering an apparent sequential structure based upon a succession of "contrapuntal

effects," Kennedy finds that structure to be underpinned by three "signs of postmodern sickness" which "work against the formation of personal relationships or communal ties" (210). The first of these--a subject consistently present throughout Carver's career--is alcoholism. It is directly behind the marital disintegration in "Chef's House," "Where I'm Calling From," and "Careful," and is shown in "Vitamins" to be deeply connected to the "vacuousness of postmodern life." The second sign is rootlessness, an element which seems particularly evident in "Vitamins." Kennedy observes that "for Carver's characters, real life is always elsewhere" (210). Finally, there is the constant allusion to television- watching throughout the volume. Kennedy pays this subject quite a bit of attention, contending that it is more than just a symptom of human isolation in the postmodern environment, but a significant contributor to our alienation from one another, and to the emptiness pervading the lives of Carver's characters. Cathedrals are only "something to look at on late-night TV" for the narrator of the collection's final story, who admits he doesn't "believe in . . . anything" (Cathedral 225).

J.G. Kennedy's work on Cathedral is ground-breaking for two reasons. First, quite simply, is the fact that his is

the first detailed argument about how the volume may operate as a sequence. Even those few critics before him who examine the collection as a sequence, such as Runyon, tend only to make connections between pairs of stories. Critics such as Nessel, who treat the volume in terms of overarching thematic implications, do not explicitly connect their work to the developing body of story sequence theory. There is, therefore, before Kennedy, little attempt in the critical material to paint an overall picture of how all of Cathedral's stories relate to each other, and to story sequence criticism.

Second, Kennedy is the first critic to recognize the importance of the volume's discontinuities, and to argue that they in fact may be the central element in a sequential reading of Cathedral. Such an argument meshes neatly with Kennedy's much more expansive definition of the sequence, and seems appropriate to the postmodern critical environment indicated by Miriam Marty Clark and others. It deeply undermines the general perception that Raymond Carver significantly softened his touch in writing Cathedral, and challenges Carver critics and sequence theorists alike to take a fresh look at the volume.

Kennedy's analysis of the volume's stories--how they seem to form a theoretical "cathedral"--is a valuable starting point for further analysis of the volume. It is not without weaknesses, however. Firstly, its analysis of the opening trio of stories--although generally accurate in its collective assessment of them as being a grim depiction of relationships--ignores the critical importance of "Feathers" in establishing for the reader the central thematic preoccupation of the volume, namely, the potential for positive transformation through meaningful human communication, and the frequent inability, or unwillingness, of protagonists to realize this potential. If Cathedral is indeed a sequence, then this preoccupation undoubtedly represents its "thematic core." Kennedy also misses an important moment of empathy in the second story, "Chef's House," which presages later, fuller connections between characters, and works in tandem with a similar moment in "The Bridle" to complicate our reading of the volume's first and last stories.

More significantly, Kennedy ignores what may be the most important of all the collection's discontinuities. The discrepancy between stories about characters who remain trapped in their isolated states, and those that depict

breakthroughs in communication between characters, is hinted at by Kennedy in his observation of "contrapuntal themes" in the sequence structure of Cathedral, but (by his own admission) not fully developed. When an exploration of this key discontinuity is developed, it reveals much more than a "pervasive sense of detachment and dissociation," instead pointing to a complex revelation of both the possibilities, and poignant failures, of human communication.

The discontinuity is developed, primarily, in a progression which, in broad terms, moves from "Feathers" through "A Small, Good Thing," near the middle of the volume, to the volume's last story, "Cathedral." This progression generally moves along a positive axis: a concentration of stories towards the end of the volume, which are more hopeful about the possibilities of communication, deliver Cathedral's characters, to some degree, from a state of alienation to one of collaboration. "Feathers" is a stark portrayal of the lost potential for escape from isolation. "A Small, Good Thing"--while notably bracketed by pairs of stories pervaded by alienation--adds complexity and ambiguity to the emerging sequence by bridging gaps between characters with a resulting beneficial

transformation. The volume's lead-up to its final, transcendental connection between characters consists of three stories which, to some extent, collaborate with the last story in realizing the potential for communication. Our sense that there is a progression toward a more optimistic treatment of the "thematic core" is significantly complicated by notable ambiguities in the final stories of the volume, however. Finally, Kennedy misses the vital importance of "The Train," a fragment whose role in compacting and crystallizing the main concerns of the volume render it akin to "The Father" in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?

While Kennedy does not specifically refer to the existence of a "narrative deep structure" in his analysis of Cathedral, the term is useful in the context of two key underlying patterns operating within and among the collection's stories. These are, firstly, the recurrence of narratives involving characters' actions with respect to a clearly-defined potential for positive transformation. Such a pattern is identifiable in every story save "Vitamins" and "Careful," in which no such positive potential seems to exist in the first place. Secondly, there is the loosely-overarching progressive pattern among the volume's stories,

composing a narrative chain which generally moves Carver's characters away from isolation and towards redemption.

Crucial to a more complete understanding of how Cathedral works as a sequence is a more detailed analysis of its opening story, "Feathers", which solidly establishes the "thematic core" of the volume. The story begins with the narrator, Jack, and his wife, Fran, receiving an invitation to dine with Bud (a friend of Jack's from work) and his wife, Olla. Almost immediately, there are signals that the story's milieu is one of tenuous, or even nonexistent, communal connections. The narrator tells us that Fran--who "wasn't too thrilled" about the dinner invitation--"didn't know [Bud] and . . . wasn't interested in knowing him Why do we need other people? she seemed to be saying" (4). We learn that Jack has telephoned Bud's house once before, only to hang up when Olla, whose name he couldn't remember at the time, answered the phone. Fran hopes that the dinner will not disrupt their routine of isolation too much: "Let's not make a production of it, or else I don't want to go" (6).

The twenty-mile drive to Bud and Olla's place takes Jack and Fran into the countryside outside their hometown, a journey they have never before taken: "We'd lived in that

town for three years, but, damn it, Fran and I hadn't so much as taken a spin in the country" (6). Jack seems susceptible to the idyllic associations with a more traditional and communal life that the countryside implicitly suggest: "I said, 'I wish we had us a place out here'" (6). Fran's opinion of their new surroundings differs markedly: "'It's the sticks out here'" (7).

Their dinner with the very unrefined Bud and Olla is a strange experience, but there are strong indications--symbolised by the "bird of paradise," in whose tail "every color in the rainbow" shone--that the latter couple's life may be a sort of ideal. If this is the case, it is an ideal which the couple have worked at creating. Bud has made every effort to fulfill his wife's wishes, including having her crooked teeth repaired and buying her the peacock she has dreamt of possessing since childhood. Their baby, which the narrator observes is shockingly ugly, is nevertheless clearly a great joy for Bud and Olla, who, as Jack himself realizes, seem to have the capacity to construct a complete and satisfying world with what they have been given: "So okay if it's ugly. It's our baby They might have thought something like that." As Saltzman observes, every disadvantage or setback in their life seems to be "smoothly

incorporated into the fabric of their abiding love for one another" (127).

The narrator leaves Bud and Olla's, as he puts it, "feeling good about almost everything in my life," and yet, for Fran, the evening marks the beginning of a "change"-- indeed, as we learn, a marital disintegration. It is significant--but generally overlooked by critics--that for the narrator, "[t]he change came later." We have had indications that Jack is more receptive to the possibilities of Bud and Olla's world than is Fran. At the story's conclusion, he seems tantalizingly close to a realization that the evening at Bud and Olla's could potentially have signaled the beginning of a very positive change in his relationship with Fran. The couple has clearly gained an insight into a relationship in which participants are able to construct a "paradise," but fail in the end to exploit that insight usefully in their own lives. This is due, in good measure, to a complete breakdown in communication which is noted twice in the last three paragraphs of the story. When it is revealed that Fran has quit her job, cut her beautiful hair, and gotten fat, the narrator says, "We don't talk about it. What's to say?" We further learn that Jack and Fran's son "has a conniving streak in him,"

"[b]ut I don't talk about it," Jack explains, "Not even with his mother. Especially her. She and I talk less and less as it is. Mostly it's just the TV" (26).

Saltzman observes that "'Feathers' teases the reader with the prospect of meaningful repair in the lives of Jack and Fran only to capitulate to the despair of preceding volumes" (125). The story's importance goes beyond this continuity with earlier Carver stories, however. In terms of our reading of Cathedral as a sequence, the story's ending represents a benchmark by which we examine the stories which follow. Broadly speaking, "Feathers" is a story of a communal connection between its protagonists and two strangers. There are indications that such a connection has the potential to transform Jack and Fran positively, but, in a relationship devoid of meaningful communication, such a transformation cannot be realized. The potential for transformation through constructive communication is Cathedral's "thematic core"; the way later stories connect with--or break from--"Feathers"' final state of affairs is one of the keys to comprehending the sequential vision of Cathedral.

Kennedy places Cathedral's second story, "Chef's House," within a trio of generally bleak opening stories.

"Chef's House" shares at least two significant characteristics with the story it follows: like "Feathers," "[`Chef's House'] is . . . about a house that affords a glimpse of paradise lost" (Runyon 140). The house in this case belongs to Chef, "a recovered alcoholic," who rents it to his friend Wes, also trying to beat an alcohol addiction. Wes persuades his estranged wife, the narrator, to move back in with him. The summer which follows is idyllic for the couple--the narrator describes fishing trips, writing letters to their grownup children, and a genuine renewal of her relationship with Wes. The reader foresees an inevitable collapse of this state of affairs, however--it comes in the form of Chef returning to reclaim his house so that his daughter can move in. The second resemblance between "Feathers" and "Chef's House" is that, in the latter story, we are again witness to a marital implosion. Carver, in this case, does not complete the trajectory of disintegration in the way he does at the end of "Feathers." He does not need to: the story's last sentence ("We'll clean it up tonight, I thought, and that will be the end of it.") indicates that "to bother to extend `Chef's House' to include verification of Wes's relapse and Edna's final renunciation would be redundant" (Saltzman 130).

There is, however, one clear and important distinction between the opening pair of stories. For at least a brief time after their initial glimpse of a pastoral ideal, Edna and Wes do communicate: "They are surprisingly in touch with each other, despite the little good it does them" (Nesbet 56). The couple share a strong empathetic moment at the end of the story, during which Edna seems cognizant of every step in Wes's rapid decline: "He didn't say anything else. He didn't have to" (32). This moment hardly takes away from the reality of the story's tragic outcome, but it does distinguish it from the conclusion of "Feathers," which, as we have seen, decidedly establishes a communicative gulf between its protagonists. It has been noted--by Howe, Nesbet, and others--that the marital demise at the end of "Chef's House" seems both uncontrollable and inexorable: Chef arbitrarily arrives at the house, and the bubble bursts. In "Feathers," by contrast, we are acutely aware of the failure of its central characters to consummate verbally the realization of possibility they are left with as they say goodbye to Bud and Olla outside the latter's country home. This discontinuity between the opening two stories is a "contrapuntal effect" that Kennedy does not acknowledge, but is significant because it seems to

indicate, early on in the volume, that Cathedral's stance on the possibility of communication will not be pervasively gloomy, but rather more complicated. "Chef's House" offers us a view of protagonists who are truly aware of one another, if only for a short time, and with not much hope that the awareness will do any good. It is a view that is not to be repeated in Cathedral until the important moment in "A Small, Good Thing" when Howard and Ann are able "to feel each other's insides" (71).

The pair of stories following "Chef's House," however, return us to an almost uniformly gloomy, uncommunicative landscape. Their role in the sequential operation of Cathedral is both to reinforce "Feathers"' sense of the potential for rejuvenation through communication, while again illustrating how, all too often, this potential is not realized in Carver's world. Their unrelenting depiction of human isolation contrasts sharply with the story they immediately precede.

Reminiscent of many stories in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, "Preservation," a portrait of deep human paralysis, opens with the revelation that Sandy's husband "had been on the sofa ever since he'd been terminated three months ago" (35). Severed from his job and identity as a

roofer, he soon becomes isolated from human contact in a way that aligns him with the man Sandy reads about in Mysteries of the Past, who is discovered after spending two thousand years in a peat bog. Sandy is alarmed by the possibility that her man may also spend an eternity in stasis.

A crisis interrupts the status quo when Sandy returns one day from work to find the refrigerator broken. The resulting mess is a crystallization of the dissolution of normal life for Sandy, who then confronts her husband. The solution to the refrigerator problem may be an auction of household wares, which Sandy is eager to go to with her husband. It represents for her a nostalgic connection to the rural family life of her childhood, more specifically, to her relationship with her father during that time: "She'd gone to auctions with her dad. Most of those auctions had to do with farm animals. She seemed to remember her dad was always trying to sell a calf, or else buy one. Sometimes there'd be farm equipment and household items at the auctions. But mostly it was farm animals" (44-45). We are vaguely reminded by these images of the country road that Jack and Fran find themselves on as they drive to Bud and Olla's, with its "milk cows moving slowly toward old barns" (6). Carver clearly invests the auction with the

sense of potential that Bud and Olla represent in "Feathers." It is the image of her husband's unmoving feet, however, that tells us the couple will not be going to the auction barn: "She looked down at her husband's bare feet. She stared at his feet next to the pool of water. She knew she'd never again in her life see anything so unusual. But she didn't know what to make of it yet" (46). Saltzman notes that "in predictable Carver fashion, Sandy's inarticulateness completes her bondage" (131). It is, however, the inability of her husband to take action on the possibility of a break from their present crisis which the auction seems to represent--for the story's last sentence takes the feet back into the living room and towards the sofa--that truly solidifies the couple's paralysis. Much like Jack and Fran, Sandy and her husband are not able to bridge the communicative divide in a way which might have saved them from disaster.

"The Compartment," among the bleakest renderings of Cathedral's "thematic core," is critical to the sequential operation of the early part of the volume. It solidifies for the reader the "pervasive sense of detachment and dissociation" which Kennedy indicates, but which becomes complicated by several later stories. "The Compartment"

takes the isolation and failure to exploit opportunity which entrap the protagonists of "Feathers" and "Preservation" to their extreme. The title of the story itself "connotes the main character's predicament of self-containment without self-sufficiency" (Saltzman 131). The main character is Myers, and as the story opens we find him in a first-class railway compartment, nearing what is to be the climax of a solitary vacation in Europe, a meeting with the son he has not seen since the collapse of his marriage eight years previously. There are ominous signals, however, that Myers may be too comfortable with the idea of continued isolation to exploit this rapidly approaching opportunity: "Now and then Myers saw a farmhouse and its outbuildings, everything surrounded by a wall. He thought this might be a good way to live--in an old house surrounded by a wall" (48).

When Myers discovers the theft of his watch, his attempts to communicate the problem to his companion in the compartment are met with complete incomprehension. "Dazed with anger," Myers seems all too eager to return to a state in which he does not have to make the effort at communication--this is confirmed when he decides that he does not want to meet with his son after all. At the end of the story Myers wanders into the next railway car, only to

find that it has been coupled to a new train, destination unknown. Saltzman notes that "even Myers himself recognizes this last embarrassment as representative of the dissociation that defines him" (133). Myers even takes one last step in distancing himself from the new direction his life is taking, by sitting with his back to the train's direction of motion. He is left, finally, in a new compartment, "surrounded by strangers whose appearance, language, and joviality exclude him" (Saltzman 133).

This final depiction of Myers, who has chosen "to stay insulated in his 'compartment' and remain on the train, reneging his promise to the boy and walling out everything external to his selfish world, paternal obligation included" (Nesset 51), is, according to many critics, the most unrelentingly ominous image of human isolation in four opening stories, which are fairly unambiguous in their treatment of this "thematic core." The moment is especially poignant in light of the lost potential for renewal which it represents. Each of the stories preceding "A Small, Good Thing" tantalizes us with such possibility, and in each case, the main characters fall short of a positive transformation. The only notable break in this early sequential organization is the brief moment of empathy

between Edna and Wes at the end of "Chef's House." It foreshadows at least three such experiences in "A Small, Good Thing," which, positioned near the centre of the collection, significantly complicates the reader's emerging understanding of Cathedral's sequential nature. "A Small, Good Thing" is a lengthy, powerful, and complete vision of human communion. It renders a sequential analysis of Cathedral based upon "a pervasive sense of detachment and dissociation" at best problematic.

The story certainly opens in an atmosphere of detachment. Ann Weiss orders a birthday cake for her son, Scotty. She notes that her communication with the baker amounts to no more than "the minimum exchange of words, the necessary information" (60). After a mental search for any possible connection they might have, "She gave up trying to be friends with him" (60).

After Scotty is hit by a car and hospitalized, the story takes on the sense of "existential menace" explored by Jon Powell and others. This menace is created in the first place by our uncertainty over whether Scotty will live. Then there are the cryptic telephone calls which each of the Weisses receive when they return home from the hospital. The "menace of perpetual uncertainty" pervading

"A Small, Good Thing" is a more prolonged and precise version of the looming threats underscoring the volume's previous stories, especially "Chef's House" and "The Compartment" (Powell 647).

The first of three moments when this sense of menace is at least temporarily overcome occurs just after Ann's full realization by Ann of what may, in fact, be at stake for the family: "She stood at the window with her hands gripping the sill, and knew in her heart that they were into something now, something hard" (70). Her husband Howard joins her at the window: "They both stared out at the parking lot. They didn't say anything. But they seemed to feel each other's insides now, as though the worry had made them transparent in a perfectly natural way" (70-71). It is a moment, much like the one shared briefly by Edna and Wes, in which "the disruptive force of calamity . . . causes both Ann and her husband, hemmed in now by fear and dread, to project outward as they seek respite from confinement" (Nesset 63). Like many other characters in Cathedral, and indeed throughout Carver's fiction, Howard and Ann are unable to articulate their feelings of anxiety. But they overcome this verbal impasse through a realization of their "spiritual transparency" to one another (Stull 9).

The next significant connection between characters comes when Ann encounters a black family in a hospital waiting room. As Ann learns, they are much in the same predicament as she is--they await news of whether an operation on their son, Franklin, stabbed earlier in the evening, has been successful. Franklin's father is sympathetic to Ann's explanation of what has happened to Scotty, and then describes his family's situation. The clarity and understanding that exist between Ann and a stranger sharply contrast with her earlier frustration with the inscrutability of the baker, and the mystifying telephone conversations both she and her husband have with the caller whose identity eludes them for most of the story.

The final, climactic connection comes when Howard and Ann confront the baker. It is, in part, a verbal connection: the baker describes the state of existential confinement which has increasingly come to define his life, and, after eating, the three find they are able to "talk on into the early morning" (89). It is also, as many critics have observed, a figurative communion, with clear reference to the Christian sacraments: "`Smell this,' the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. `It's a heavy bread, but rich' . . . They swallowed the dark bread." The story ends with a

sunrise, "a classic symbol of Resurrection" (Stull 13).

"The high, pale cast of light in the windows" (89) described in the final sentence is at least vaguely reminiscent of the interior lighting of a church or cathedral. Michael Gearhart argues that the empathetic communion implicit in the act of breaking bread together clears the way for a full verbal connection: "Perhaps the most significant aspect of [the reconciliation between the Weisses and the baker] is revealed in the concluding sentence, which suggests that if a self-conscious understanding of nonverbal communication is gained, then human communication--not just implicit, but verbal--is possible" (446). The conclusion of "A Small, Good Thing," therefore, advances us from the fleeting moment of empathy in "Chef's House" to a fully realized understanding, in both verbal and visceral terms, between characters.

There is a wide gulf between "A Small, Good Thing"'s treatment of the "thematic core," and that of the pair of stories which precede it: "Preservation" and "The Compartment" follow the tenuously positive signal at the end of "Chef's House" with despairing visions of the lost potential for communication. An even sharper break exists between "A Small, Good Thing" and the couple of stories

which follow it. Indeed, this gap is among the the most pronounced in the volume, for neither "Vitamins" nor "Careful" offers so much as the potential for human connection, or reconnection, that exists in preceding stories. Kennedy's observation of "contrapuntal effects" is certainly relevant to this discontinuity: "A Small, Good Thing" realizes the sense of potential implicit in "Feathers," while "Vitamins" and "Careful" do not even indicate that potential, let alone realize it. The fact that "A Small, Good Thing," with its encouraging treatment of the communication issue, is sandwiched between pairs of very pessimistic stories, demonstrates a profound ambiguity at the heart of Cathedral's sequential operation.

"Vitamins" is pervaded by a sense that American society is sick at its core, and, even worse, that no one wants to change it. It is the first of a pair of stories in which the potential for transformation through communication, usually visible in the volume's treatment of its thematic core, seems to disappear. The narrator's wife Patti, who sells vitamins door-to-door, laments the fact that "nobody's buying vitamins Middle of winter, people sick all over the state, people dying, and nobody thinks they need vitamins" (98).

In "A Small, Good Thing," there are three distinct moments of human connection. Ewing Campbell observes that in "Vitamins," there are three rejections of intimacy. In the first case, Patti rejects the sexual overtures of her friend and work partner, Sheila. Later in the story, at a Christmas party, the narrator embraces another of Patti's friends, Donna, and is temporarily rebuffed. Finally, in the central action of the story, the narrator takes Donna to an after-hours bar, hoping to "go to her place to finish things" afterward (108). Their strange encounter with a black Vietnam veteran drains the evening of its sexual possibility and leaves the narrator isolated and seemingly on the verge of disaster. There is in the story one sexual encounter between the narrator and his wife, only she is asleep at the time: "I lay for awhile, winding down. Then I started in. But she didn't wake up. Afterwards, I closed my eyes" (96).

Verbal as well as sexual isolation is endemic to "Vitamins." In the story's alcohol-saturated conversations, characters simply talk past one another: "What's wrong, honey?' I put the drinks on the table and sat down. She went on like I hadn't said anything. Maybe I hadn't" (98). Nessel notes that the inability, or

unwillingness, of "Vitamins"' characters to listen to each other "finds its emblem in the form of a dismembered, dried-out human ear" which Nelson, the Vietnam veteran, carries as a trophy of war (64).

Rather than attempt to change their condition, the cast of "Vitamins" look for ways to flee from it. One temporary avenue of escape is through heavy drinking. Another possibility for salvation may be to move away. As Kennedy points out, "Vitamins" is permeated by a vague notion on the part of its characters that life may be better somewhere else. The principle locus of restorative potential seems to be Portland. Near the end of the story, Donna thinks about moving there: "Maybe I could go up to Portland There must be something in Portland. Portland's on everybody's mind these days. Portland's a drawing card." The idea that Portland, however, is much different from where she is now is a flimsy one, as Donna finally half-realizes: "Portland's as good a place as any. It's all the same" (108).

"Careful" joins "Vitamins" in a uniformly bleak treatment of the core sequential issue of communication, with little potential for a change of condition in sight. The narrator, Lloyd, has separated from his wife and now

lives in an apartment whose dimensions reflect the stifling limitation of its occupant's current predicament: "Inside the rooms, the roof slanted down sharply. If he walked around, he had to duck his head. He had to stoop to look from his windows and be careful getting in and out of bed" (111). The disturbing ear problem which Lloyd finds himself suffering from the morning his wife, Inez, comes to visit is simply the most obvious and distressing manifestation of the story's treatment of "metaphorical deafness" (Nesbet 64). Lloyd's real problem is not his ear at all but rather his alcoholism. He is unable, however, to communicate this to Inez: "He began thinking of things he ought to say to her. He wanted to tell her he was limiting himself to champagne and champagne only. He wanted to tell her he was tapering off the champagne, too. It was only a matter of time now. But when she came back into the room, he couldn't say anything. He didn't know where to start" (117-18). She does not seem receptive in any case: "But she didn't look at him, anyway" (118). Indeed, a solid barrier has developed between the two characters, as is made clear when Inez says: "'Christ, I can't hear you, either. Maybe this is catching'" (116). We understand that Lloyd must deal with his alcohol addiction before communication can be

restored, but, tragically, he sees it just the opposite way: "He knew he'd have to deal with this pretty soon. But first, he'd have to get his hearing back" (119).

"Where I'm Calling From" shares the subject of alcoholism with "Careful," but, in terms of its treatment of Cathedral's "thematic core," delivers us back in the direction of "A Small, Good Thing": characters in both use "the act of exchanging stories . . . as a refuge" (Nesset 63). It is one of three stories--the others being "Fever" and "The Bridle"--preceding "Cathedral" in which the potential for communication, evident in most stories since "Feathers" is, to varying extents, realized. This concentration, toward the end of the volume, of stories in which lines of communication are successfully established suggests, broadly-speaking, the latter part of a sequential progression toward a more positive rendering of Cathedral's "thematic core." This positive progression is pervaded by unsettling ambiguities, however, and should not be overstated.

Verbal communication in "Where I'm Calling From" represents both a temporary sanctuary from alcoholism, and also a significant step towards recovery. Peter J. Donahue argues that the story's "proliferation of language, through

conversation . . . disrupts the ideology of alcoholism by preventing characters from becoming verbally isolated" (60). The narrator tells his story, as well as the stories of J.P., Tiny, and the 'guy who travels.' He even recounts London's 'To Build a Fire'" (60). The alcohol rehabilitation facility is a place where, it seems, meaningful language can be, and is, generated (60).

The story opens with the narrator--in Frank Martin's "drying-out facility" for the second time--listening to J.P, another alcoholic, recount his story. We learn that when J.P. was twelve, he fell down a well. The depiction of his experience at the bottom of the well is "Where I'm Calling From"'s indication of the potential that exists for salvation from isolation: from the bottom of the well, "everything about his life was different for him But nothing fell on him and nothing closed off that little circle of blue" (130). As in "Preservation," in which Sandy associates the restorative potential of the auction with her father, the potential of the well image is linked to J.P.'s father, who rescued him that day from the well. J.P. goes on to tell of how he met his wife, a chimney sweep named Roxy. The act of telling "increases [J.P.'s] vigor as it frees his voice. It also clears a path for the narrator to

follow out of his own eviscerated grimness" (Saltzman 147). When Roxy visits J.P. on New Year's Day, the narrator meets her and asks for a kiss. He associates the act with good luck, a link that has been forged in his mind by J.P.'s earlier description of how Roxy had, when she was cleaning chimneys, accepted kisses for this reason. The kiss "marks a turning point, as if by asking for [it] he is acknowledging his condition and is willing to change it" (69). It is after the kiss that the narrator resolves to call both his estranged wife and his girlfriend. Although maintaining he will not "bring up business," he has chosen to initiate a potentially reparative dialogue. It is not literally the kiss, of course, which is the catalyst for this reconnection, but the meaning which listening to J.P.'s narrative has invested it with. In "Where I'm Calling From," listening begets talking. The story joins with "A Small, Good Thing" in helping to undermine the bleak uncommunicative landscapes of "Vitamins" and "Careful" which they bracket. The arrangement of these four stories is a further indication that ambiguity is quite deliberately built into Cathedral's sequential design.

"The Train" plays a role, in terms of the volume's sequential strategy, similar to that of "The Father" in Will

You Please Be Quiet, Please? Both, viewed within their respective collection's "textual structure" (Kennedy, "Poetics" 15), reveal a moment at which the central issues of the stories which surround them are sharply delineated. "The Train" has received relatively little attention from critics who treat Cathedral as a whole, but is linked by Kennedy to the "The Compartment": both, he says, are "dissonant narratives," and, moreover, describe "solitary railway journeys" (206). He ignores, however, the singular importance of "The Train" in compressing the volume's central obsession--the dilemma of communication--into the story's final image of Miss Dent and the couple she has met at the train station boarding a train car of silent passengers. As with "The Father," our reading of "The Train" is greatly dependent on whether or not we approach the story within the larger context of Cathedral. This dependence on surrounding stories is true of all stories within all potential sequences, but becomes especially crucial in the case of a particularly opaque story like "The Father" or "The Train."

The first influence, in any case, on our reading of the story is its dedication to John Cheever, and the fact that its events begin where Cheever's "The Five-Forty-Eight"

leaves off. Runyon observes that the relationship between the stories causes the reader of "The Train" to "feel that he or she has arrived on the scene too late, that a lot must have happened before the story began" (173). This serves to isolate the reader from the story's characters. The obliqueness of what these characters do say only contributes to our alienation. Facknitz notes that "we eavesdrop, but learn little. In fact, the more they say, the less we know. Why is this man in his socks? What is all this about a trip to the North Pole? The growing, inchoate set of questions suggests many meaningful and intriguing stories, none of which can cohere unless Miss Dent asks for elaborations, for sense" (346). "The Train"'s second layer of isolation is between its characters. Miss Dent does not ask "for sense," nor does she offer the old man and the middle-aged woman any of her story. The middle-aged woman's baffling discourse clarifies none of the problems she and the old man have apparently faced earlier in the evening.

The story ends with all three characters boarding a train. It is noted that other passengers "naturally assumed that the three people boarding were together" (155), a false assumption that immediately estranges them from the newcomers. Their lack of curiosity can only further

disconnect them from Miss Dent and the others: "They can see that the three are not happy and that something has happened, but they look no further, content that they have `seen things more various than this in their lifetime'" (Facknitz 347). The train pulls away with its occupants "united" in a railway car, but, as a result of the communicative barriers they have established, very much compartmentalized from one another, and, like Myers in "The Compartment," no longer in control of their fate. In the larger context of Cathedral, we know that they have the potential to release themselves from isolation--such potential is revealed in nearly every story in the volume beginning with "Feathers." "The Train" is a stark vision of the confusion and alienation which inevitably result from the failure to exploit this potential for establishing connections.

Characters in the final three stories of the volume, to varying degrees, do find the words to exploit this potential. In their ability to communicate and forge connections, they participate in a shift in the volume's treatment of its "thematic core." Just as readily as these stories indicate a sequential progression away from alienation, however, they introduce ambiguities which to

some extent counter the shift. In particular, the moment of connection between characters which "The Bridle" offers is nearly overwhelmed by the story's climate of despair and futility, and seems to offer little hope for meaningful change. There are also several elements present in the volume's final story which complicate its total vision, and contribute to the sequence's overall ambiguity.

The first of this trio of stories, "Fever," like "A Small, Good Thing," is almost immediately informed by a crisis: in this case it is the sudden departure of Carlyle's wife at the beginning of the summer. Despite the apparent partial solution to the crisis represented by the arrival on the scene of Mrs. Webster--whose matronly assurance instantly puts Carlyle more at ease with his situation--the story possesses the same sense of menace which permeates "A Small, Good Thing." When Mrs. Webster mentions she has something to tell Carlyle, he anxiously anticipates what will follow: "'Tell me what?' he said, fear plucking at his heart" (180). Just as the Weisses in "A Small, Good Thing" have to accept that their Scotty is gone, so too must Carlyle acknowledge the fact that Mrs. Webster is leaving. Each story could have ended at this point, but instead they go on to suggest, along with "Where I'm Calling From" and

the volume's final story, the potentially restorative, even transformative, value of human communication.

As in "A Small, Good Thing," "Fever" ends with an important positive connection between protagonist and stranger. Carlyle says "all he knew to say" about his life with Eileen (185). Mrs. Webster listens and is able to empathize: "Something just like it happened to me once, something like what you're describing" (185). It is clear that Carlyle, through this communication with Mrs. Webster, is passing through a stage which will end, much as his fever will end: "And soon he stopped feeling awkward and forgot how he was supposed to feel" (184). As the story ends, Carlyle "understood it was over, and he felt able to let her go it was something that had passed" (186). Like the Weisses, Carlyle must still face a forever-altered life. But in both stories we are left with a final impression that a moment of meaningful human interaction, however brief, will help the protagonists do so.

The volume's penultimate story, "The Bridle," contains a single, tenuous connection between strangers amid a number of pointless, even absurd, interactions. Holits and his family have lost their farm in Minnesota, and have come to Arizona to try to forge a new life for themselves. Their

move, along with the narrator's dreamy speculations about where her fifty-dollar bills will end up, aligns these characters with the cast of "Vitamins," under the perpetual illusion that life will be better somewhere else. We quickly sense, however, that life in Arizona will be no easier or more fulfilling for the family. Holits, it seems, cannot find work, and his wife "[meets] herself coming and going", working a split shift at a nearby restaurant. Moreover, life in the "community" that is the apartment complex where the family lives is almost completely devoid of the kind of human connection which could potentially make life more bearable for its occupants. The narrator outlines its "social life": there is the building party that offers an attorney's divorce services as a door prize. There is the time the narrator and her husband go to Spuds and Linda Cobbs' apartment for dinner, only to be baffled by Spuds' film footage of his deceased first wife. Finally there is the climactic drunken party around the swimming pool that ends with Holits jumping off the cabana and cracking his head.

There is one glimmer of hope amid all this, and that is when Holits' wife is able to relay her family's hard-luck story to the narrator one afternoon while the latter gives

her a manicure. Like Mrs. Webster, the narrator listens and empathizes. There is no indication, however, that the brief connection between Holits' wife and the narrator will change much for either--like Wes and Edna's empathic moment in "Chef's House," it is ultimately not sufficient to allow the possibility of a transformation.

"Chef's House" and "The Bridle" bear further comparison in that they both occupy significant positions in Cathedral's sequential arrangement. They are the second and second-to-last stories respectively. Both stories depict a breakthrough in communication, but they are possibly the volume's most fleeting and ineffective instances of such a breakthrough. In terms of our sequential reading of the volume, each of the stories reacts with a neighboring story to produce, in Kennedy's words, a "precariously uncertain" effect. "Chef's House," as we have noted, advances us, if only slightly, from "Feathers"' sense of missed opportunity. "The Bridle," juxtaposed against "Cathedral"--physically and figuratively the "opposite" of "Feathers"--does the reverse by working to dampen the final story's optimism.

The arc of ambiguity which counterbalances and complicates an apparent sequential progression away from alienation, and toward what Nessel labels "self-enlargement"

(51), continues into the action of the final story. Chief among the complications which work against "Cathedral"'s apparent embodiment of positive sequential progression is the fact that the narrator and his wife's relationship is characterized not just by discontent, but outright mistrust. As Robert, the couple's blind guest, and the narrator's wife catch up on past events, the narrator listens with increasing agitation: "They talked of things that had happened to them--to them!--these past ten years. I waited in vain to hear my name on my wife's sweet lips: `And then my dear husband came into my life'--something like that. But I heard nothing of the sort" (218). As Kennedy notes, the narrator's wife is not a party to the story's final communion: "Significantly, during the drawing exercise, he refuses to answer the last question his wife poses: `What are you doing? Tell me, I want to know' (Modern Sequences 209). Finally, we must note that this communion is initiated by the use of hallucinogenic drugs. Nevertheless, the story's conclusion is unquestionably the volume's strongest manifestation of the kind of communicative bond present in "A Small, Good Thing," "Where I'm Calling From," and "Fever," and as such must deeply inform our overall reading of Cathedral as a sequence.

From "Feathers" onwards throughout the volume, most of Cathedral's stories yield concrete potential for transformation through communication. In "Cathedral," it is, of course, the image of a cathedral that represents this potential. Critics have acknowledged the ambiguities which the image itself evokes. Lehman notes that "a cathedral [is] at the very least a curious metaphor, given its complex, and often exploitative, role in medieval society" (55). Then there is the disquieting fact that the story's cathedral image is television-generated. Such reservations are valid, but do not, in the final analysis, significantly challenge the cathedral's role in the story of suggesting the possibilities of human connection and collaboration. The blind man describes the building of cathedrals in this way: "`I know generations of some families worked on a cathedral The men who began their life's work on them, they never lived to see the completion of their work. In that wise, bub, they're no different from the rest of us, right?'" (224). It is evident that the "metaphorical resonances" which the author intends us to experience in this story's use of a cathedral image are more associated with "common humanity, benevolence and good will, patient

human effort and fortitude in the act of `a-spiring`"
 (Nesset 68).

The story's final act is, as many critics have observed, a complex reciprocal act of "building." As in the communion between the Weisses and the baker, the connection between its participants entails both physical and verbal interactions. At the blind man's suggestion, the narrator begins to draw a cathedral. Robert closes his hand over the narrator's, thus joining the building process. The act allows Robert to escape, at least temporarily, his blindness. The narrator, in turn, is freed from the isolation and prejudice that the story has earlier attributed to him. This reciprocation suggests that "verbal handicaps--not to mention the larger problems of which they are symptoms--are like unto blindness, debilitations stemming from the willed blindness of oversight, of poor insight, of ignorance" (Nesset 67). It also indicates that such "verbal handicaps" can, sometimes, be overcome. The collaboration finally takes on a transcendental significance: "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything" (227). Kirk Nesset interprets the final two paragraphs of the story in this way:

What begins . . . as the enclosing spatial configuration of [the narrator's] home—and of his present level of awareness, we guess--gradually swells in proportion to become something more spacious, something awesome and utterly new, its interior depths as enlightening to him as bakeries and bedrooms are comforting to others. (Nesset 68)

The story's collaborative act seems to possess, as an inherent property, the power to transform positively. Ewing Campbell writes that the narrator's wife "may well like what she sees after Robert departs, for in a single event her husband has moved closer to sharing her values--intuitively perhaps, unconsciously, but also convincingly" (66).

Facknitz maintains that "following the metaphor of the story, the narrator learns to see with eyes other than that insufficient set that keeps him a friendless drunk and a meager husband" (295). Even Kennedy--among the most reluctant to give the final collaboration much weight--acknowledges that the narrator's "sense of being no longer 'inside anything' perhaps signals a transcendence of his neurotic preoccupations" (209).

The narrative trajectory of the final story to some extent mirrors Cathedral's sequential progression: while it does, in general terms, convey its narrator from a state of isolation to one of transformation, there is a significant cross-current of ambiguities in operation up until the last moment. Likewise, Cathedral's treatment of a "thematic core," the dilemma of communication, moves, in broad strokes, toward more hopeful resolutions. Each of the stories which precedes "A Small, Good Thing," a fleeting connection in "Chef's House" excepted, is a study in the failure to escape isolation, although the potential to do so, through meaningful communication, clearly exists. "A Small, Good Thing"'s three instances of positive transaction, the last an almost spiritual experience, are nevertheless set amid pairs of starkly pessimistic stories, the latter pair bereft of even the hopeful signals we observe in earlier stories. This sharp disunity at the midpoint of the collection dampens the positive impact of "A Small, Good Thing" and indicates a complex sequential strategy designed to reveal, almost simultaneously, states of isolation and collaboration. The emerging sequence indeed seems intent on creating a "precariously uncertain" effect.

The latter part of Cathedral is notably less precarious in its balance of insularity and communication. Four of the last five stories yield meaningful connections between characters. Discontinuities continue to complicate our reading, however. Among the last five stories is "The Train," the volume's starkest and most distilled vision of the absence of communication. The penultimate story presents a world in which lines of communication can open, but seem unable to effect meaningful change. Finally, there are the several uncertainties surrounding the volume's final transcendence between the blind man and the narrator of "Cathedral."

These discontinuities only enhance our sense that Cathedral is a carefully-arranged sequence. Its twelve stories each treat the issue of communication. Communication's potential to transform is clearly established in "Feathers," and is an observable element of nearly every subsequent story. In several stories, characters do indeed communicate, with demonstrably positive results. Their successes throw into relief the failures of others to liberate themselves through meaningful interactions, and render these failures more poignant. Although there is a general movement through Cathedral in

the direction of realized potential, a careful sequential structure ensures that we are not, at any point in our reading through the volume, overwhelmed by either an atmosphere of dissociation, or one of unmitigated optimism about communicative possibilities. Cathedral's authorial design largely defies generalities--evidence itself of a complex sequential structure as much dependent on discontinuity as it is on unifying characteristics.

CONCLUSION

The devices which make Cathedral a highly successful short story sequence are simply extensions of those we observe, in a less complete way, in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? possesses a "thematic core" which relies heavily on treatments of the issue of communication. This issue becomes the central one in Cathedral. Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? has a "narrative deep structure" observable as a pattern within several stories, with the final story of the volume reversing and complicating the pattern. Cathedral's patterning is more complicated again: discrepancies between how its twelve stories treat the central preoccupation of the volume, combined with the arrangement of the volume's stories, undermine our attempts to recognize thematic unity.

the volume, combined with the arrangement of the volume's stories, undermine our attempts to recognize thematic unity.

Cathedral is an example of a new type of short story sequence, one in which discontinuities are as important as unifying factors. When we speak of discontinuity in relation to the modern sequence, we mean, firstly, the physical breaks between component stories, and, secondly, the way these breaks serve to undermine our attempts to recognize thematic unity in a given sequence text. When applied to a modern sequence, therefore, Ingram's "thematic core"--a central notion in early sequence theory--generally refers not to an unambiguous theme, but to a more complex system of (in some cases contradictory) thematic elements. The arrangement of twelve stories which makes up Cathedral has a "thematic core" which reveals, almost simultaneously, the possibilities of communication, and the failure to overcome barriers against constructive dialogue. Thematic ambiguity is deliberately built into the arrangement of Cathedral's stories--an aspect of authorial design which the sequence genre is especially able to accommodate.

To understand modern sequences better, we need to modify our use of the standard tools of sequence examination developed by Ingram and others, and create new ones.

Several of Mann's "generic signals," in particular title, table of contents, protagonist and setting, have reduced importance in light of sequences like Cathedral, which tend to eschew these signals, at least as overt unifying elements. Ingram's "thematic core"--with the above-mentioned modification--is, perhaps, replacing Mann's "generic signals" as the most common associative feature among a modern sequence's stories. Robert Luscher's definition of the sequence in terms of a continuum likewise takes on added importance when we consider a volume such as Cathedral, which by no means strikes a "balanced tension" between the independence of its components and the unity of the whole, but undoubtedly favours the former. As well, Luscher's comments on the ability of the sequence genre to raise our "thematic awareness," and actively engage us in "creating meaning," seem particularly applicable to modern sequences. Modern sequences emphasize complex revelations of theme, and devalue the sort of formal unity which may restrict us to a narrow interpretation of text.

J. Gerald Kennedy's contributions to sequence theory are particularly applicable to the modern sequence. His suggestion that "intertextual signs" and "narrative deep structure" are among the most vital elements of a poetics of

the genre is especially relevant to the kind of sequence which favours subtle patterning within and among stories. More important, however, is Kennedy's 1995 definition of the sequence, for it compels us to reexamine every single-authored collection of stories. Even if we ultimately conclude that a given single-authored collection is not a fully-formed sequence, as we must, for instance, in the case of Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, the patterns we uncover will undoubtedly enrich our understanding of both component stories and the text as a whole. Indeed, the idea that any volume of short stories by a single author can justly be considered a "text," as opposed to merely a physical collection, is the challenge offered by emerging short short sequence theory, and by modern collections such as those of Raymond Carver.

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