A Moment of Transcendence:
Encountering Each Other In and Beyond
the Fiction of Raymond Carver

An English Honors Essay
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So the wind that billowed her sheets announced to her
the resurrection of the ordinary.

-- Marilynne Robinson

But isn't solitude, too, a portal? Does it not happen
sometimes in the stillest lonesomeness
that we unexpectedly behold?

-- Martin Buber
Introduction

This is an essay about reading Raymond Carver. It deals mostly with his work in general rather than with what individual stories mean or exemplify. My aim is to describe and understand the experience of Carver that I had upon my first reading. I will show how reading Raymond Carver can be a spiritual experience, and, in fact, was for me. The reading experience becomes spiritual when readers exchange meaning with the characters through identification and by doing so consider themselves in such a way that they fully embrace the patterns of their lives and manage to transcend them. Because this is an essay based on experience and the feeling imparted by the stories, it is not focused entirely on texts. The experience that I will discuss happens in interaction with the stories but mostly outside of them and therefore is not well suited to close readings and textual examination. In fact, these approaches exist contrary to my purpose, which is to highlight an immediate experience that is only possible to reflect upon once the reader is “beyond” the text.

I will use the theological work of Paul Tillich and Ludwig Feuerbach to illuminate a spiritual reading of Carver. I do this, hoping not to impose their theories on Carver but to use their language (since my own will often fall short) to explicate an experience that was already present in my reading before I began to examine it. Tillich’s ideas on ultimate concern will provide a background for my understanding of Carver’s fiction as spiritual and for viewing humanity as alienated from our realities, a condition which is temporarily soothed through reading Carver. Feuerbach articulates a belief in species consciousness that sets up humans as essentially relational and provides a context for understanding the identification with Carver’s characters that is necessary in reaching transcendence.

I begin, not with a discussion of this transcendence, but with American society’s obsession with the ordinary, which often leads readers to authors such as Carver who highlight the quotidian in such a way that it becomes spiritual. Fascination with the ordinary
permeates our daily lives and yet we encounter our quotidien as meaningless. What makes Carver distinct is his ability to frame the ordinary in a meaningful way, allowing us to eventually connect with others through mundane events. In achieving importance for our daily lives and connecting through them, we address humanity’s dual concerns of finding individual meaning and ending alienation. Our preoccupation with the ordinary, while initially drawing readers to Carver, is the locus of transcendence. Paradoxically, it also leads to the fleetingness of the spiritual reading experience. As I will show, interest in the ordinary leads to a hyper-reflective state that is not in keeping with spiritual occurrence.

It is only after establishing our desire to view the quotidien that I can move on to examine how the ordinary becomes spiritual. I do this through a discussion of human meaninglessness and alienation and how that which addresses such conditions can be seen as spiritual. I show how responses to reading Carver are elucidated by Feuerbach’s concepts of species consciousness and human divinity. Then, in my third section I point out the fleeting nature of the spiritual reading experience and the above mentioned paradox that our obsession with the ordinary both sparks and kills mystical phenomenon. Throughout these sections I weave in textual examples and my own experiences, which are, in essence, the basis of the essay. I am saying that reading Carver has the potential to cause a spiritual reaction, but I can only say that with confidence because I know that it did for me.

I have struggled with the decision to write about my experience, not seriously enough to abandon the project but seriously enough that I have felt the need to justify it to myself. I had to do this for the simple reason that I find it off-putting when people assume that deeply personal things have great value to others; I am not drawn to another’s reading experience if it has no resonance for me. Similarly, my friend and I, knowing how dull it is to relate our dreams to each other, have adopted a policy of saying, “Okay, I know it’s really boring to talk about your dreams because no one actually cares but last night…” This disclaimer
works for our casual conversations but it doesn't satisfy me in terms of this essay; “Okay, I know this entire essay is boring but can you read it anyway?” I would like to believe that what I write is not something I have to apologize for. Rather, I hope that it has a wide resonance in addressing aspects of the human condition and showing how reading can assuage these feelings of alienation and meaninglessness by connecting us to ourselves and to others.

My experience with Carver takes its meaning from a personal realization of the universally mundane and the universally alienated. By showing this universality, I aim to tap into a situation within reading and humanity that exceeds my reading of Carver. This has to be a somewhat personal essay because I want it to be honest. I have only been able to come to the conclusions in it through reflecting back on my own experience. I am, then, working backwards, having the experience and then trying to explain it, not explaining Carver and then realizing the possibility for this experience. However, despite the personal subject of this essay, the very nature of the spiritual glimpse that I received/undertook is relational and by discussing this relational quality I hope to partly overcome the essay’s individuality. In my experience, our sense of alienation is soothed by identification with characters. Through this identification we are able to posit other potential readers with whom we would also be able to identify. It is this real-life possibility for identification that prevents the experience from being purely self-involved.

Faith in other readers like myself inspired this project. Through writing I hope to articulate a belief in an unacknowledged shared experience of alienation and connection that I received while reading Carver. My belief in the shared nature of the experience has led me to assume a particular voice in this essay. Throughout it, I will periodically shift from first person singular pronouns to first person plural. I use “I” and “my” with confidence since everything I say is based on my own reading of Carver. My use of “our” and “we,” although
it may seem less supported, is unavoidable. Carver gives me the faith in that "we," and this essay, therefore, depends on its potential presence more that its substantiated one.
Part One: The Ordinary

Cereals; bed-sheets; socks and shoes.

Question of the afternoon: is Oprah Winfrey a simple genius or a soft dictator? Does she know what we want or do we want what she says? With book-clubs, charities, and relationships, the answers are debatable, impossible even because of the way Oprah positions herself as inextricable from the culture that she rules over. It is in her role as the Queen of the common or the commoner Queen that Oprah’s genius is indisputable. Her “Favorite Things” segments highlight her mundane, personal preferences and those of her audience and guests. What is your favorite cereal? What kind of sheets do you sleep on? Sock, sock, shoe, shoe, or sock, shoe, sock, shoe? The tone seems familiar to us because we have these same conversations with our friends and families in the supermarket, the bedroom, and the kitchen. We are fascinated by our little decisions-- Apple Jacks; flannel; sock, sock, shoe, shoe-- and by the trivial choices of others. These private exchanges don’t satisfy us for long, though; our friends are long-bored with us and we know them too well. We need to expand our circle of familiarity. Oprah, the corporate executive of culture, delivers the large-scale quotidian that we crave.

Going far beyond Oprah, current interest in the ordinary ranges from talk-shows, memoirs, and 24 hour web broadcasts, to the somewhat new voyeuristic reality shows such as “Big Brother.” The context for the display of the ordinary may change but the desire to see our common (meaning both mundane and shared) experiences broadcast and validated is the same. Although contemporary fiction does not usually exist on the same level of popular culture as TV and the web (unless of course it’s an Oprah’s Book Club selection), it often appeals to our sense of the ordinary in its straightforward realism, average characters, and quotidian subjects. Raymond Carver stories, in their spare style and honest approach to
everyday situations, provide readers with written versions of the quotidian slices of life that they desire.

What do I mean by fiction of the quotidian/ordinary/mundane/everyday? It is fiction that embraces seemingly insignificant events rather than ignoring them. It may in fact refer to a character’s bed-sheets or the pattern of putting on her shoes, not as a symbolic act but just as itself. It may highlight a conversation that doesn’t appear to be especially interesting about dinner or shopping or the weather. It relates anything that we might easily experience on any given day. Usually this fiction takes place over a short period of time, and in doing so is able to capture details that sweeping narratives generally brush over. A small time span allows contemporary authors, such as Rick Moody and Paula Fox, whose novels *Purple America* and *Desperate Characters* take place over a few days, room to focus on mundane details (a drive on I-95, a cat bite, the design of a bedroom) because there tend to be fewer grand occurrences.

One of the most important aspects of reading quotidian fiction, specifically Raymond Carver, is that what it describes is common to its readers. Fiction of the everyday or mundane is experienced as such only when readers can identify aspects of the stories as similar to their own everyday experiences. In this way, fiction of the ordinary is culturally specific in what it describes and how it is processed. Its very nature is both broad-based (in its appeal to shared experiences) and specific (in what groups share them).

It is this potential for relation in quotidian fiction that often leads it to be deemed realism. It depends on identification, and realism is often linked to that which is easily recognizable. My first reaction to Carver was, “Oh my God! It’s so realistic.” This somewhat dull response is reflective of a general tendency to collapse the mundane with the real. Traditionally, realism is thought to be reflective of contemporary life and, therefore, its mere existence “proves” that life is understandable. In an era where the phrase “nothing is
real” is not only not frightening but also embarrassingly obvious, there is a rampant hope (despite our cynicism) that realism, and likewise, reality, might be pinned down. Walter Kaufmann describes this hope in his introduction to Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*. “What is wanted is an oversimplification, a reduction of a multitude of possibilities to only two” (10). We want to be able to say that X is realism and Y is not. Arbitrarily deciding that realism is equivalent to fiction of the ordinary gives us that ability and lets us pretend that we can identify what is real and what isn’t both in and out of fiction.

Realism is not just that which highlights our everyday life. I know that a book that deals with psychology or consciousness accurately is just as realistic as quotidian fiction. I know about social and cultural realism that don’t depend on identification. Yet, when I read Carver my feeling was “Wow, he really captures something. This is realism.” I know the meaninglessness of calling fiction realistic without describing how it is so but this tendency is hard to avoid. This is the trap of becoming conscious under post-modernism. I have been taught to view realism as a fluid category and have learned to question my tendency to depend on black and white distinctions. I recognize that there are no absolute truths yet despite my training, I still want one.

In saying that there are no “truths” of realism, I am not implying that Carver’s stories are not realist. On the contrary, I still find quotidian fiction to be very realistic. What is necessary is not to sever the categories of the quotidian and the real but to admit that realism is much broader than I initially felt when exclaiming how realistic Carver is. We are quick to narrow the category despite our knowledge of its breadth. Only when we examine why we want the ordinary to be synonymous with realism can we truly understand our attraction to the quotidian. Quotidian fiction highlights commonplace events and emotions. When we read it, we don’t need to work to find the realism it provides or the meaning that it puts in our lives. The everyday moments it represents are immediately recognizable to us and therefore
provide us with a “quick fix” of reality. In a time when truth has been replaced with “truth,” we are ready to embrace anything that gives us, if only for a moment, the ability to remove the scare quotes from our lives. This is what Carver can give us: an instant flash of confidence. Identification is fast and powerful and that is what we want out of realism-- a speedy remedy for our aching untruth.

He wondered if she wondered if he were watching her.²

In an essay entitled, “Objects of Ethnography,” Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett examines our attraction to museum exhibits which display the quotidian. She is referring to those which highlight the daily existence of people other than ourselves. In her opinion, viewing these quotidian displays causes a rupture in our own lives:

The everyday lives of others are perceptible precisely because what they take for granted is not what we take for granted...Such encounters force us to make comparisons that pierce the membrane of our own quotidian world, allowing us for a brief moment to be spectators of ourselves...(409)

Seeing everyday routines which are so unlike our own immediately makes us examine what our everyday is. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett goes on to describe how when viewing these displays we start to imagine ourselves in one in which we wake up, eat a piece of fruit, read The New York Times etc. (409). Suddenly we see what we always fail to notice and we realize how much we take it for granted when we place ourselves into a potential display:

Like the picturesque, in which paintings set the standard for experience, museum exhibitions transform how people look at their own immediate environs. The museum effect works both ways. Not only do ordinary things become special when placed in museum settings, but also the museum experience itself becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls. (410)

Obviously, museums and fiction are not the same media and theories pertaining to one wouldn’t seem to apply to the other. But, in the simplest terms, Raymond Carver
displays everyday lives and, as his readers, we become spectators of them. Therefore, it is useful to think about these general theories of the quotidian museum exhibition in relation to the fiction of the ordinary that I have been describing. Once we see the similarity between readers and museum patrons we can understand how Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's conclusions for the latter fit equally well with the former. However, despite the similarities in response for both types of spectators, there is a significant difference in the impetus that "pierce[s] the membrane" of reality in either situation.

When reading Carver, we are led to examine our everyday lives, not by seeing the difference between what we, as readers, take for granted and what the characters take for granted, but by seeing that we and the characters fail to recognize the same things. We see that fiction is quotidian only when we know that characters' actions would be "unimportant" in our own lives. It may be hard to recognize the mundane in culturally foreign fiction where readers' experiences are not similar to those of the characters. This would seem more like a lesson in culture than an experience that causes us to reflect on ourselves. And, although I'm sure they exist, a current museum display where we would see models of Americans reading the newspaper and going to the supermarket seems clichéd at best and pointless at worst. Each medium, in its particularities, must use different tools to provoke response but the nature of that response is still universal.

In either situation, quotidian fiction or quotidian exhibit, the draw is a voyeuristic one in which we get a thrill out of watching others and begin to watch ourselves as a result. When things that we do so often (go to work, brush our teeth, yell at our kids) are represented, we suddenly pay more attention to them in our lives. It takes watching a representation of someone else's unconscious acceptance of mundane occurrences to make us conscious of our own.
Our newly awakened consciousness comes to us on two levels. First is the level of experience; we are more aware of our daily routines and common practices while they are occurring. The other slightly different level is that we become aware of the possibility for spectators of our situations and begin to imagine what our lives would look like to them. We approach our everyday more intimately by embracing what we have previously ignored and more distantly by becoming imagined voyeurs of ourselves, thus bringing our experience of viewing others in fiction to bear on our own lives: “The museum effect, rendering the quotidian spectacular, becomes ubiquitous” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 413).

Levels of voyeurism in which we watch others and then watch ourselves as we imagine others might watch us is not only sparked by Carver’s fiction in general but is also reflected in some of his stories. In “The Idea,” we “watch” a couple watch a man watching his wife. The unnamed narrator of the story and her husband Vern go about their nightly routine of eating supper and then waiting to see if their neighbor appears outside. Finally he comes out of his house and stands in front of the window to watch his wife undress. The narrator and Vern are both somewhat repulsed by their neighbor’s actions and fascinated by the game of make-believe they witness:

“By God,” Vern said.
“What does she have that other women don’t have?” I said to Vern after a minute. We were hunkered on the floor with just our heads showing over the windowsill and were looking at a man who was standing and looking into his own bedroom window.
“That’s just it,” Vern said. He cleared his throat right next to my ear. (Carver, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? 18)

Vern understands that what his neighbor wants by watching his wife undress is not to appreciate her unique beauty but to disassociate from her, and therefore from his life. He puts himself in a position where he can attempt to view his own surroundings in the most impersonal way. What turns him on is to view his wife, not in the way he knows her, but as a stranger, as any woman undressing.
Although the narrator doesn’t pick up on this desire, her own voyeurism allows her to attain some of the detachment that her neighbor craves. The museum effect on her is intense and immediately powerful because she is not only observing but is observing the very act of observing oneself. From the time that she and Vern commence their nightly watching there is tension evident in the story, even once the neighbor has “returned” to his own life. The narrator’s anger and disgust at the watched woman is easily seen as resentment: “‘Someday I’m going to tell that trash what I think of her,’ I said and looked at Vern” (19). The narrator has a nervous energy throughout the rest of the story, as if what she saw somehow negatively enlivened her. She relieves some of this dissatisfied excitement by providing a late night smorgasbord of leftovers on which she and Vern gorge themselves.

The narrator’s frustration and anger, while never explained (as things are never “explained” as such in Carver’s fiction), most likely results from a clearer understanding of her own life after having watched someone else’s— the museum effect. Observing her neighbor’s illicit everyday life (everyday for him, since it is stated that it is a regular activity) gives the narrator the tools Kirshenblatt-Gimblett identifies, which allow her to remove the membrane around her own unnoticed activities. The narrator, unlike her neighbor, is not turned on by what she sees. Rather, she is saddened at her dull life and bitter towards her neighbor’s wife both for being a part of the action that sparked this recognition and for having what appears to be a sexiness worth watching. David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips, in their essay “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver,” comment on the kind of disappointment the narrator feels, which is associated with seeing yourself from the outside: “The voyeuristic glimpse leads to a rupture in the seemingly calm surface of life, and a disaffection with the self. It is an awakening to the possible terrors of existence” (90). The narrator in “The Idea” cannot see the true source
of her irritation and the story ends on a bitter note: “‘That trash,’ I said. ‘The idea!’ I used
even worse language, things I can’t repeat” (21).

The voyeurism in “They’re Not Your Husband” is similarly dismal. In a certain
sense, the main characters of this story, Earl and Doreen, are a negative reflection of the
neighbors in “The Idea,” which comes directly before “They’re Not Your Husband” in the
collection Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? Earl Ober also watches his wife, but not with
enjoyment. When he visits her at the restaurant where she is a waitress and overhears two
men discussing her body, he receives an unwanted glimpse of his wife/life from an outside
perspective, “As Doreen walked away with the coffeepot, one of the men said to the other,
‘Look at the ass on that. I don’t believe it.’ The other man laughed. ‘I’ve seen better,’ he
said. ‘That’s what I mean,’ the first man said. ‘But some jokers like their quim fat’” (Will
You Please... 22). The frustration that the narrator feels in “The Idea” at the presence of a
hypothetical voyeur is made worse and more destructive for Earl when these voyeurs are
actualized. Earl decides to take action to improve the voyeurs’ verdict on the mediocrity of
his daily life. He convinces Doreen to go on a “diet,” which in his mind means starving
herself. After a few weeks and a few unhealthily lost pounds, Earl acts out the role of self
voyeur that he has adopted since he first heard the comments of the men. Convinced that he
has improved what the men initially saw, Earl “removes” himself from his role as Doreen’s
husband and sits down next to another man in order to watch his life from the outside:

“What do you think of that?” Earl said to the man, nodding
at Doreen as she moved down the counter. “Don’t you think that’s
something special?”

The man looked up. He looked at Doreen and then at Earl,
and then went back to his newspaper.

“Well what do you think?” Earl said. “I’m asking. Does it
look good or not? Tell me.”

The man rattled the newspaper. (29)
Earl Ober depends too much on an outside voyeur to validate his life. When he is awakened to what others think of his wife, he is not able to overcome it. His self is completely mediated by outside sources, making it impossible for him to be happy with his life if others do not approve of it. His attempts at changing the negative voyeuristic view backfire; they only make him appear pathetic to the other characters in the story, who are perplexed at why he would want to elicit a stranger’s opinion on his wife, and to the reader, who witnesses his inability to either fully step outside his life or fully embrace it from within.

Every instance of self-voyeurism in Carver is an instance of disappointment, even horror, as characters suddenly realize the emptiness of their lives. In *Understanding Raymond Carver*, Arthur Saltzman states: “self-revelation can terrorize instead of liberate. A glance at the mirror held too long, a moment’s hesitation before getting the phone, or something out of place in the closet can strip away all the familiar upholstery of one’s existence and turn a person into ‘his own visitor’” (32). This negativity in the stories causes Boxer and Phillips to posit a similar reaction on the part of readers. “But Carver has laid a trap for us too, for, along with the characters, we may experience the benignly familiar suddenly becoming strange and even frightening...Carver, at his most distinctive, forces us to see through the most conventional and habitual experiences of everyday life. It is the familiar, the seemingly ‘known,’ which is the true mask of the terrifying” (83). Readers do go through a similar process to the characters, becoming voyeurs of themselves but, rather than what Boxer and Phillips suggest, the result may be less negative, even wonderful, for them.

As I will attempt to show, the reflection that occurs when reading Carver can be an enlightening one far from the hopeless scenarios that are described in “The Idea” and “They’re Not Your Husband.” Usually, Carver’s world appears more dismal than our own, not because what he represents is unrealistic but because he tends to represent one (accurate)
side of human (specifically, American, middle-aged) experience, leaving out some of the sunnier aspects of our daily lives. It is precisely this gloominess that can allow readers to have an experience close to the one Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes, in which their own quotidian is realized as "spectacular" rather than depressing. The readers' world becomes spectacular through a recognition of the universal meaninglessness that identification with the characters bestows.
Part Two: Reading Carver, Gaining Transcendence

Fish, affairs, and marijuana.

I have already mentioned my initial response to Raymond Carver and have implied that calling something realistic is a bit of a weak description. But I don’t want to be too harsh towards my first reaction since it is that one, much more than subsequent readings, that this essay is based on. My introduction to Carver was *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and it was the transcendent experience I had while reading that collection that was the inspiration for this paper. In that sense, the Carver I have read since that time isn’t fully a part of what I am discussing since I approached it having already considered some of the issues of spirituality, ordinary, and transcendence. However, at this stage, my readings and my retrospective thoughts about those readings have become somewhat indistinguishable. Although it was *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* that initially invoked the response in me, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* has inevitably become a part of that response.³

If I hesitate to describe my actual reading experience, it is because its very essence was ineffable. William James’ words on the inexpressible quality of mystical episodes comfort the feeling of inadequacy that goes along with my inability to accurately describe my state of mind: “The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others” (123). Being in strong agreement with James on this point and yet knowing that the purpose of my essay is to examine my initial reading of Carver, I have been trying and will continue to try to represent the experience that I had while being unable to give a play by play report.
I don’t pretend to remember everything about my initial reading of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. A few images, though, remained with me long after I finished. There was a little boy, in his kitchen, holding half a dead fish. Then there were two couples, high on pot. There was a man trying to talk while his mistress was busy squeezing his blackheads. And finally a couple sitting at a table going through the motions of discovered infidelity. Although now, after having read the stories a few more times, I am more aware of their qualities as a whole, it was these moments and countless smaller ones that first struck me.

This is in keeping with Carver’s writing. His gift in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* is one of glimpses and glances. It is the instances captured within these images and others that took me by surprise, brought me into the story, out of my usual surroundings, and then back to my daily life again, this time more fulfilled.

While some of these images, the boy with the fish or the husband and his unfaithful wife, are not necessarily quotidian, they become so through Carver’s treatment. I’ve never been fishing, and I didn’t grow up in a time or place where I would stay home from school, hitch a ride, and spend the afternoon by a river. And yet, despite this, I can identify with “Nobody Said Anything”. Maybe this connection is something abstract; possibly I’m able to identify with the essence of the story, being American and having its themes a natural part of me: the outdoors, the quest, the teamwork (two boys eventually catch one fish and cut it in half). Or maybe it’s simpler and I identify with the emotional aspect of it, the heartbreaking quality of the last scene, so real that it’s almost palpable:

...He said, “I don’t want to look.”
I said, “It’s a gigantic summer steelhead from Birch Creek. Look! Isn’t he something?”
He looked into the creel and his mouth fell open.
...He screamed, “Take that goddamn thing out of here! What in the hell is the matter with you? Take it the hell out of the
kitchen and throw it in the goddamn garbage!”

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. (Will You Please... 61)

This scene’s power, despite its specific subject-matter, comes in its universality. We have all had the feeling of being at once angry, dejected, hurt, and embarrassed by a parent’s (or anyone close to you) reaction. When we read “Nobody Said Anything” we can simultaneously imagine the narrator’s frustration and remember a similar emotion in our own lives.

This emotional identification is just as strong in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”

Carver’s depiction of the wrenching emotions surrounding Ralph Wyman’s discovery of his wife’s infidelity is astonishingly accurate:

Then suddenly he knew! His mind buckled. For a minute he could only stare blankly at his hands. He knew! His mind roared with the knowing.

“Christ! No! Marian! Jesus Christ!” he said, springing back from the table. “Christ! No, Marian!”

“No, no,” she pleaded. (Will You Please... 237-238)

Ultimately, though, what amazed me more than these high-intensity emotional scenes, was the exactness with which Carver portrayed the little instances of the everyday that I mentioned earlier: the squeezing of blackheads, the smoking of marijuana (which is more everyday for some than others). This latter activity is presented in such a truthful way in “What’s in Alaska?” that after finishing the story, I ran up to a friend (as I did often after reading a particularly accurate passage) and said, “You’ve got to read this, it’s so realistic!”:

“I should have made some dip for these chips,” Helen said.

“Wasn’t there another bottle of that cream soda?” Jack said.

“We bought two bottles,” Carl said.

“Did we drink them both?” Jack said.

“Did we drink any?” Helen said and laughed. “No, I only opened one. I think I only opened one. I don’t remember opening more than one,” Helen said and laughed.
In a while Jack stood up. "I know what would taste good and that's some cream soda," Jack said.
Mary and Helen laughed.
"Go ahead and laugh," Jack said grinning. "Who wants some cream, soda?"
"Some what?" Mary said.
"Some cream soda." Jack said.
"You stood up like you were going to make a speech."
Mary said.
"I hadn't thought of that." Jack said. He shook his head and laughed. He sat down. "That's good stuff," he said. (Will You Please... 83-85)

Boxer and Phillips aptly point out: "There's a transcribed quality to this conversation...as if Carver had been sitting in the corner noting down each comment, pause and peal of laughter. He has it down exactly, the directionless quality, the silliness, the halting rhythm of talk among people under the influence of marijuana" (80). Yes, Carver does have it down exactly--too exactly to have been sitting in a corner transcribing events. This story, like many others, is so accurate that you can't help but feel that the author has been through the experience. I picture Carver, not sitting transcribing the conversation, as Boxer and Phillips suggest, but sharing the marijuana. Of course Carver might never have smoked pot, just as he probably never actually had the conversation Ralph and Marian had. But, you would never know that from these stories. Carver's greatest strength lies in his ability to make it appear to readers as if he has experienced all he has written about. It matters more that it seems that way than if he actually had undergone these events.

Boxer and Phillips recognize Carver's unparalleled accuracy, "The colloquial language, the first-person persona pieces, the dialogue's recorded quality, all suggest that the writer consciously has slipped into the lives of his characters and caught them at unguarded moments. Carver is the writer as voyeur, a chronicler of overheard conversations and secretly witnessed actions" (81). Carver is a brilliant observer, not from afar but from within, which makes him appear not only like a voyeur but like a self-voyeur. In this sense, Carver
takes into himself the experiences of his culture by describing events and emotions with an
exactness that would seem to come only from first-hand knowledge. Through this ability to
illustrate events as if they were his own, he creates characters and stories that he understands
and portrays with the eye of a genius and the feel of an everyman.

He who can read the style of a culture can discover its ultimate concern, its religious substance.4

Although it was the small quotidian moments that stood out most to me on my first
reading of Carver, I don't remember them as clearly now as I remember the bigger scenes in
the stories I just described. One reason for this is that in some senses, Carver stories take
place in real time. I mean by this that those moments which are fleeting to the characters are
fleeting to us as readers as well. We read them, they briefly take on meaning, and they then
return to their quotidian-ness, seemingly innocuous until the next reader brings them alive.
Thinking back on it, I knew that these flashes occurred but I couldn't say exactly where.
After having gone back again through these stories, looking at my old underlinings, it seems
that "The Student's Wife" was especially full of quotidian draw:

She raised her knees to make a tower with the covers. (Will You
Please... 126)

He turned his pillow over to the cooler side and lay down again. (127)

He tapped his toes against her foot. (127)

The covers had pulled up at the foot of the bed, and she could feel
a draft when she moved her legs. (129)

She washed her hands and face in the bathroom. She
brushed her teeth. She brushed her teeth and watched her face in
the mirror. In the living room she turned up the heat. Then she sat
down at he kitchen table, drawing her feet up underneath the
nightgown. She cried again. She lit a cigaret from the pack on the
table. After a time she walked back to the bedroom and got her
robe. (130)
At the time, I didn’t know exactly why I was so moved by these and other everyday moments. I knew that they were accurate; I knew that I recognized them in my own life, but I couldn’t tell why they were poignant. Why is shifting in bed meaningful to me? Why does his foot-tapping seem significant? Is it pure self-obsession that drives my excitement when I see my own little patterns fictionalized? Before I attempt to explain my conclusions surrounding my reaction to these quotidian moments, I first have to lay out some assumptions about human nature. I am of the belief (and not alone in it) that humans are essentially relationship-seeking beings, that we are on a constant quest for connection with others. We find this connection far less than we would like to and, because of failed attempts at communication and association, end up most often feeling alienated from each other. I believe, also, that a contradiction exists between our need for relationships our inherently self-obsessed natures. Our greatest goal is for personal meaning but to establish individual meaning we must have a comparison, and thus we form relationships.

Although our dual need for relationships and individuality may be influenced by a particularly post-modern sense of daily loss of truth, the contradiction in our nature is not a new one. Philosophers and theologians have consistently explored these needs, in greater depth than this essay allows, as being basic to the human condition. Therefore, I turn to Friedrich Schleiermacher’s words in On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers, which examine human contradiction with an eloquence far surpassing my own:

The human soul, as is shown both by its passing actions and its inward characteristics, has its existence chiefly in two opposing impulses. Following the one impulse, it strives to establish itself as an individual. For increase, no less than sustenance, it draws what surrounds it to itself, weaving it into its life, and absorbing it into its own being. The other impulse, again, is the dread fear to stand alone over against the Whole, the longing to surrender oneself and be absorbed in a greater, to be taken hold of and determined. (4)
Normally, I'd be in no rush to definitively name these attitudes or decide where I think they fit in with other human concerns. But I am determined to connect them eventually to my reading of Carver and therefore must bite the proverbial bullet and say, after my mere twenty-two years of experience, that negotiating the balance between self-obsession and connection is one of, if not the main struggle for humanity. Following this, finding individual meaning and soothing alienation through larger meaningful connections could be said to be one of humanity’s “ultimate concerns.”

I borrow the term “ultimate concern” from Paul Tillich, whose ideas I have decided to utilize, not because I agree with his entire outlook but because he articulates certain aspects of spirituality and the human condition which are in keeping with my experience. It is not a perfect fit, but no source that I have found has been. Tillich’s agenda is ultimately more traditionally religious than my own approach of secular spiritualism. He defends religion from exactly this type of distinction by saying that, “You cannot reject religion with ultimate seriousness because ultimate seriousness, or the state of being ultimately concerned, is itself religion” (8). Despite this argument, I cannot separate “religion” from God and the sense of spirituality that I am espousing has no need for a traditional conception of Him. Therefore, when Tillich says religion, I say spirituality. I don’t make this distinction casually and recognize that by doing so, I may be giving in to the fear to say religion that Tillich tries to combat. However, I use Tillich the way that I do because his discussion of ultimate concern and religion provide a theological framework for my arguments. And while I’m not ready to use “religious” (mostly because of the time it would take to extract it from its connotations), I do see the experience of reading Carver as being theologically relevant. But I emphasize the fact that I quote Tillich because in his defense of religion he captures something close to what I would like to say about spirituality in relation to Carver, not because we have identical motives.
Tillich’s definition of religion is inextricably tied to ultimate concern, which I attempted to set up earlier: “Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern” (8). What I have labeled as our ultimate concern is tied to the pattern of contemporary consciousness struggling to find meaning despite the belief that there is none, striving to come to one truth in an era of too many. We are endeavoring to overcome our solipsism through relations, we feel that alienation is inevitable and yet we jump at the chance for connection. By embracing these concerns and seeing their importance we are, in Tillich’s definition, experiencing our religion: “When we say that religion is an aspect of the human spirit, we are saying that if we look at the human spirit from a special point of view it presents itself to us as religious” (5).

If one says that humanity’s ultimate concern is religion or, as I prefer, spirituality, then that which attempts to examine and address this concern is spiritual. The themes present in Carver’s fiction and the experiences present outside of it speak to the human condition in such a way that, according to the logic I am espousing, it is religious/spiritual writing. Instead of feet dirtied by the sands of Jerusalem streets, Carver’s protagonists show their toil through grease on their pants and sawdust under their nails. His are the leaderless members of the working class, followers without conviction, and exemplars of an aimless mission. Their stories become spiritual when we realize that their struggles are universal ones. They ache for connection and consistently fail, ending in the meaningless solitude that they knew was unavoidable but hoped for a minute was not. “Sacks” provides a sampling of this failed connection when a long-estranged father and son meet up at an airport, only to be reminded of their separation:

My father started to say something more. But instead he shook his head. Maybe he wanted me to say something. But then he said, “No, you got to catch a plane.” I helped him into his coat and we started out, my hand guiding him by the elbow.
“I’ll put you in a cab,” I said. 
He said, “I’ll see you off.”
“That’s all right,” I said. “Next time maybe.”
We shook hands. That was the last I’ve seen of him. On the way to Chicago, I remembered how I’d left his sack of gifts on the bar. Just as well. (What We Talk About When We Talk About Love 38).

This interaction is one among many of Carver’s dialogues that show readers the alienation and lack of communication that plague humanity.

Tillich believes that the root of this kind of alienation lies in the fact that people cease to view their everyday existence as significant. He locates this loss of significance, or at least loss of perceived significance, historically by linking it to existentialism: “Out of this predicament of man in the industrialized society the experiences of emptiness and meaninglessness, of dehumanization and estrangement have resulted. Man has ceased to encounter reality as meaningful. Reality in its ordinary forms and structures does not speak to him any longer” (46). Although current alienation may be traceable to the existentialists, it is decidedly different. The alienation that I refer to is not the grand sisyphean hopelessness of existentialism but the daily, unconscious loneliness and confusion distinctive to the post-modern condition. Maybe this is yet another reason why we are attracted to the quotidian, to other people’s mundane situations. We are looking for our absent meaning in the everyday lives of others. We are unconscious of the potential meaning that our quotidian holds yet we are drawn to its representations. Carver stories provide us with encounters of everyday realities as well as portraying the hopelessness we feel.

Carver’s stories, by attempting to take on this hopelessness, become spiritual to readers. As Tillich argues, “The great works of art show a struggle with non-being. These arts then show man’s protest and predicament and then become ‘theologically significant’” (47). We have lost our appreciation for our own reality, we know this and Carver reinforces it. And yet, by the very fact that we are drawn to read these quotidian based stories, we work
against this trend. As discussed in the first section of this essay, we crave the quotidian but it is not until we see Carver’s characters taking it for granted that we find meaning in our own mundane aspects. The characters’ attempts to overcome their alienation are spiritual attempts to address their ultimate concern, which fail to change their situation. Our readings are spiritual in that they succeed in quelling some of our own alienation and in bringing transcendence to the ordinary.

\[\ldots \text{everyone is always a vessel to someone.}^7\]

A reciprocal process occurred when I read Carver, and I am assuming that it is a process that could happen to other readers as well. We approach Carver, as we approach everything, with the sense of alienation and meaninglessness that is always lying dormant in our experiences. We are not continuously thinking of this situation, and are consequently not conscious of our search for individual meaning and connection or our desire to find it in Carver.

Although, as I have already stated, it is not possible to achieve meaning without relation, we must achieve meaning within ourselves through relations before we are able to appreciate relationships and recognize the meaning they have given us. The first level of meaning comes even before we begin reading Carver. Readers usually assume that what they read will be somewhat important. I knew that Carver was a well-respected writer before I started reading him and therefore already imposed a certain amount of meaning \(\text{onto}\) his characters before I encountered them.

However, Carver’s characters do not feel that their lives are meaningful. They are often left at the end of a story with the sense that there might be something to their experiences but that realization of meaning never occurs. The final sentences in “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” exemplify this pattern of just-missed realizations.
“I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone’s heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, none of us moving, not even when the room went dark” (What We Talk About... 129). Since meaning never occurs within the text, it is up to readers to supply the characters with the meaning that they need. We do this simply by reading their mundane, ordinary stories. By doing so we are saying that their lives, which they understand as incomplete or meaningless, are worthy of being published; that we are not only willing but want to sit down and lose ourselves in their unfulfilling jobs and unhealthy marriages.

We also give characters’ meaning through our identification with them. By identifying with their plights, we tell them, although they don’t hear us, that they are not alone in their miscommunications and connections. This is eventually also a way that they give meaning back to us. Before that, though, Carver characters give us back our lost love of reality. Because we attribute inherent meaning to their lives from the start of the reading experience, we are able to give ourselves some of this meaning when we see our own patterns in their stories. If there is meaning in Ralph’s wounded marriage, then there must be meaning in my own. If Mike’s habit of flipping over the pillow is interesting, then my little habits must be interesting as well. In “rendering [their] quotidian spectacular” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 413), we are able to view our realities as transcendent and overcome the meaninglessness that Tillich sees as plaguing us. In surmounting this, we address a part of our ultimate concern (to find meaning in our everyday lives) and in doing so experience an overwhelming sense of spirituality.

Carver allows us to address the other half of our ultimate concern, isolation, once again through identification. By giving characters meaning through our association with their plights, we develop a relationship. No sooner are we thinking to ourselves that the characters should not feel so isolated (because we understand them) than we are feeling less isolated ourselves. We realize that we share a common plight with these characters and this
sense of sharing slightly assuages our loneliness. For isolation always feels a little less strong when you know someone else feels lonely as well. This partly soothes our sense of alienation but it cannot be completely healed within the text. There is only so far our relationship with these characters can go since they are unaware of the relationship themselves and, more importantly, are fictitious, existing in a world almost identical to our own yet permanently separated from it.

This realization could have the effect of alienating us more. Luckily, though, our pseudo-relationships with Carver’s characters give us the tools to form connections outside the text. As soon as we identify with the characters and see that our ordinary lives are similar to theirs, the door is open for extra-textual connections to be made. We assume (as I continue to do in this essay) that if we are like the characters, then others must be like us as well. We can imagine the process that potential readers would go through and know that they too would find meaning in their ordinary lives. Two things then happen: Carver stories become a source of connection to these other readers, and we start seeing our new appreciation of the neglected quotidian as a universal phenomenon and not an individual one. By overcoming our own alienation, we can see that our struggles are universal ones; we can view clearly our ultimate concern as humanity’s and by doing so participate in a connection that gives us a sense of something larger than ourselves.

We can affirm nothing without affirming ourselves. According to Ludwig Feuerbach, what distinguishes man from other animals is his consciousness of himself as part of a larger species, “Consciousness in the strictest sense is present only in a being to whom his species, his essential nature, is an object of thought” (1). It is this “species consciousness” that allows humans to have complex relationships with each other. We can be sympathetic to one another and whether or not we really can understand
anyone else, we go about thinking and hoping that we can: "Man is at once I and thou; he can put himself in the place of another, for this reason, that to him his species, his essential nature and not merely his individuality, is an object of thought" (Feuerbach 2).

Feuerbach, in his critique of religion, says that everything we take to be divine is not, because we can never move beyond our species experience. Everything we see, we see in terms of ourselves. To use Feuerbach's example, when we look at a caterpillar we don't reflect upon its essential nature, we see the caterpillar as what it is for us (2). We can never remove our own experience from our interpretations; "Whatever kind of object, therefore, we are at any time conscious of, we are always at the same time conscious of our own nature; we can affirm nothing without affirming ourselves" (Feuerbach 6). According to this logic, that which we understand to be divine is nothing more than the experiencing of ourselves as divine. It is a feeling, not of otherworldly exaltation, but of human transcendence, of our own infinity: "The divine nature which is discerned by feeling is in truth nothing else than feeling enraptured, in ecstasy with itself—feeling intoxicated with joy, blissful in its own plenitude" (9). Since we can never feel anything but ourselves, when we think we feel divinity, it must be our own.

Feuerbach's theories are useful when looking at Carver in two ways that are ultimately connected. The first relates to our initial identification with the text. As I stated earlier, we are always attempting to find meaning for ourselves and, therefore, approach everything with "selfish" motives. In addition, following Feuerbach, we necessarily approach everything through ourselves. Feuerbach means this in terms of relating to other species, but it occurs intra-species as well. Everything we come into contact or identify with is shaped by our individuality, even if we are not conscious of our true nature. We are both I and thou, but we can never be thou without being I (or I without being thou, which is why we search for relationships). This does not mean that we are never more than our individuality—
the very nature of species consciousness is that we are. But it does mean that just as we can
never leave our species behind when we observe and experience the world, so too we are
never without our individuality; we bring it with us into the larger human experience.

It is this inability to leave ourselves behind that allows for identification in texts. If
we were fully able to be “thous,” we could immerse ourselves in empathy in such a way as to
prevent self-centered thoughts from interfering with our bond. Ultimately, though, this
would not be meaningful to us. The creation of meaning, which is what we ultimately desire,
is based on comparison and relation, not just empathy. Therefore we approach every text
through our own experiences and, indeed, can never read without imposing our lives onto the
characters. Only in certain cases, though, does what we read so clearly resemble what we
bring to it that we are momentarily shocked at our self-recognition.

This self-recognition is not expected because we are not conscious of the extent to
which everything is mediated by our own experiences, especially because we do not usually
find meaning in our quotidian lives and don’t think of them as carrying much clout. This
may seem contradictory to the obsession with the ordinary that I set up in the first part of my
essay, but actually it speaks to an inherent contradiction within ourselves. We are fascinated
with our daily existences and those of others yet we ignore them. Despite our interest in the
quotidian, we don’t take it seriously, we don’t realize the potential it has to give us meaning.
It is only when we see these characters’ lives as startlingly close to our own that we reflect on
that which we’ve passed off as meaningless. This, again, is a form of the museum effect.
When we see the similarities between what we and the characters take for granted we are able
to appreciate our quotidian lives (our food, clothing, arguments, habits, etc) and realize the
extent to which we bring them into every interaction we have. It is then, when we make
connections based on similarities, that we most understand ourselves as individuals.
When identification has occurred and self-understanding has been achieved, we can become aware of what Feuerbach terms species consciousness, which has been present in our reading but not yet recognized. Once we gain meaning for ourselves we can think about that which gave it to us: our ability to connect with the characters in the stories. This is species consciousness, the unique capacity we have to understand another human. Our relations and identifications allow us to understand ourselves and then, in turn, apply what we know of ourselves to others and consciously identify with them. It is this conscious realization of connection that lets us see clearly the importance of identification, the importance of our species consciousness (even if we don’t know the term, we understand its meaning in the instant when we feel truly connected to another).

As I have already discussed, the realization of humanity’s ultimate concern can be a spiritual experience. Recognizing one’s species consciousness is tied into the spirituality of ultimate concern. Species consciousness is rarely recognized, let alone appreciated, so that when our attention is called to it, we are overwhelmed at seeing an unknown part of ourselves. It points out the potential for connection and ability to identify with another human’s plight that is inextricably linked to our nature, and thus addresses our ultimate concern in quelling our alienation and explaining aspects of our humanity and individuality.

Understanding species consciousness means understanding our inherently limited nature (we can’t get beyond ourselves) as well as our infinite one (ourselves are everywhere). Feuerbach uses these dualities to conclude that what humans think of as God, is indistinguishable from themselves. “The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective—i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature” (14). According to Feuerbach, what we think of as the predicates of God (love, justice, omniscience, omnipotence) are
simply those predicates that we value in ourselves, raised to a level that we could never achieve as imperfect humans. We create distinctions between divine nature and human nature to allow us to fail in our own ideals of perfection. It is only when we realize that our conception of God is human nature idealized that we are able to abandon our belief in Him and focus on realizing the potential for perfection in ourselves. “And it is our task to show that the antithesis of divine and human nature is altogether illusory, that it is nothing else than the antithesis between human nature in general and the human individual” (Feuerbach 14).

Feuerbach, by saying we can imagine nothing greater than ourselves, uses the concept of species consciousness to point out the flaws in spiritual thinking. And, while I agree with most of his arguments, I don’t see them as contradicting the possibility of gaining transcendence. Rather I believe they point to exactly the kind of spiritual experience that I maintain is present in readings of Carver.

The spirituality we feel when addressing our ultimate concern and realizing that it is an ultimate concern comes from an understanding of humanity, not of something otherworldly. It is this aspect of the experience that returns me to Feuerbach’s assertions. The spirituality we feel when we read Carver is one that posits divinity in the human realm and makes no claims to a higher being. We feel a connection through alienation, believe that others would also feel this, recognize the pervasive aspect of this alienation, and soothe it some through this realization.

The recognition of our nature through Carver allows us to make assertions similar to Feuerbach’s: “The absolute to man is his own nature. The power of the object over him is therefore the power of his own nature” (5). What we are moved by is not misunderstood otherworldliness but a recognition of our ability to connect and to address our ultimate concern. When we address this we are made aware of our species consciousness and the limitlessness of humanity. Rather than feel frustration at our inability to truly connect to
other species or to the divine, we feel as though we finally understand our own nature. We see our tendencies, not as individual ones, but as part of a wider human experience. In this sense we transcend because that which once existed in relation to a greater divinity becomes that divinity. This transcendence of the human into the divine occurs when we understand the spiritual nature of being fully immersed in our own ultimate concern.

In the experience of reading Carver, we feel what Feuerbach claims we always feel when we think we experience divinity. "But when religion-- consciousness of God-- is designated as the self-consciousness of man, this is not to be understood as affirming that the religious man is directly aware of this identity; for on the contrary, ignorance of it is fundamental to the peculiar nature of religion" (Feuerbach 13). The difference in this spiritual experience is that we are aware of its humanity. We are being moved by our own realities and by our ability for relation. This, however, makes it no less spiritual. On the contrary, the transcendence we feel when we read Carver is ultimately more impressive than other spiritual experiences because we are conscious of what we are overpowered by; we are not only experiencing the infinity of humanity but are recognizing it for what it is.

Thinking about the spiritual experience through Carver in terms of Feuerbach's assertions helps me to answer a question that has bothered me throughout this past year. I have been asserting, if not in this essay then at least to myself, that the transcendent experience that I received through recognition of my own quotidian aspects and the human connections that gave it to me is the most satisfying form of spirituality because it temporarily bestows meaning on our actual lives. But the more popular notions of transcendence, put forth by theologians such as William James and F.C. Happold, consistently made me question the validity of the transcendence I am claiming. Feuerbach's views on human divinity help me realize why my beliefs part company with these other ideologies.
I agree with some of James’ ideas on mysticism, particularly when he outlines four characteristics of mystical states: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. My reading experience encompasses all of these attributes. However, the consciousness that James describes within mystical states is quite different from the consciousness I claim.

“[T]here occurs an intellectual enlightenment which alone would place the individual on a new plane of existence- would make him almost a member of a new species” (130), James says, and cites a mystical experience of St. Theresa: “In short, she is utterly dead to the things of the world and lives solely in God” (133). Happold discusses mysticism in much the same way: “The highest state of the mystic life can only be reached when there has been a complete death of the selfhood” (119). The language used in these discussions-- “new species,” “dead to the things of the world,” “death of the selfhood”-- exists contrary to mystical experiences in which we truly view ourselves, our nature, and our material world for what seems like the first time.

Which is more awe-inspiring, to be moved by something because it is beyond your earthly comprehension or to have something so familiar to you suddenly become infused with a divine clarity? Following Feuerbach on this point, it is impossible to actually be moved by something beyond our comprehension because there is nothing beyond our human consciousness and that which seems to be divine is actually our idealized form. Being moved by something familiar would be, if not more grand, at least more honest than thinking we experience non-human divinity. I am not suggesting that the mystical experiences described by James and Happold can not occur, but that there may be an unrealized human dimension to them. My desire, and I can only speak for myself, is not to be momentarily separated from my world but to understand it, even if that understanding doesn’t last. Carver-inspired transcendence, in permitting me to see myself, my surroundings, and my connections, provides me with that understanding.
We can affirm nothing...

It seems necessary in an essay about spiritual experiences through fiction to discuss the role of epiphany, since it is the literary device most often associated with revelation. The simple reason I have not yet mentioned epiphanies in Carver is that there are none in his stories. Epiphany implies a realization, a sudden understanding that Carver characters lack. By and large they struggle with alienation and miscommunication without ever feeling any clarity about or alleviation of these things. The notion of epiphanies, however, is ingrained in us and therefore functions as a constant reminder of possible clarity. Since we read Carver stories with this basic knowledge of fictional epiphanies, the unyielding hopelessness in them is especially intense. This hopelessness is particularly evident in those stories where characters feel that there must be meaning to their experiences even though their struggles to discover it prove futile.

The narrator of the story “Fat” senses this potential for realization as she tells her friend Rita about a fat customer whom she recently served at her waitressing job. While someone else, like the other workers at the restaurant, might have told the story as entertainment, it’s clear from her tone that the waitress is trying to make sense of the experience. She feels that her interaction with this man holds some key to her life and that by discussing the event she might understand it and her life. Her struggle to come to a meaning is evident when she stops, midway through her story, and says, “Now that’s part of it. I think that is really part of it” and “I know now I was after something. But I don’t know what” (Will You Please... 4,6). Rita, not surprisingly, completely misses the point and is of no help, “That’s a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she doesn’t know what to make of it” (8). “Fat” ends, like many Carver stories, with the promise of meaning, which, in essence, is the same as saying that the story ends without meaning, since a “promise” doesn’t count much when the story doesn’t continue.
“Why Don’t You Dance?” ends similarly and in an even more obviously dismal manner. A young couple come upon a house with all of the belongings in the front yard. Thinking it’s a yard sale, the couple casually look through the items and are lying on the bed when the owner returns. The man, whose “yard sale” is obviously more of a reaction to a failed marriage than an attempt to sell his possessions, spends the night with them, drinking, dancing, and selling his belongings. Afterwards the girl tries and fails to come to terms with his behavior and what the strange night meant:

Weeks later, she said: “The guy was about middle-aged. All his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my God. Don’t laugh. He played us these records. Look at this record player. The old guy gave it to us. And all these crappy records. Will you look at this shit?”

She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying. (What We Talk About... 9)

The absence of epiphany, while consistent throughout Carver, is not always so blatant. “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets” is another story in which the potential for epiphany subtly haunts the readers and the characters:

The boy rolled onto his side and watched his father walk to the door and watched him put his hand to the switch. And then the boy said, “Dad? You’ll think I’m pretty crazy, but I wish I’d known you when you were little. I mean, about as old as I am right now. I don’t know how to say it, but I’m lonesome about it. It’s like—it’s like I miss you already if I think about it now. That’s pretty crazy isn’t it? Anyway, please leave the door open.”

Hamilton left the door open, and then he thought better of it and closed it halfway. (Will You Please... 207)

Hamilton, by closing the door halfway, prevents the boy from fully realizing whatever it was he might have been about to discover and shuts out the possibility for true communication and epiphany. These characters, like so many others, are left stagnating—sometimes on the brink of discovery, sometimes far from it, but always without it.
In her book *Minimalism and the Short Story* Cynthia Hallett points out the absence of epiphany as a trend for minimalist writers. "The notion that short fiction especially pivots on epiphany does not appear to have energized minimalist fiction directly-- that is not 'directly' because it may exist as a kind of kinetic force by its being resisted. For, in most minimalist versions of the short story, epiphany is rejected, replaced by a focus on the absurdity of society" (Hallett 32). Hallett is correct in her belief that epiphanies are hovering over Carver stories, existing in contrast to what actually occurs. But she is slightly mistaken in thinking that Carver instead chooses to focus on "the absurdity of society." Rather, when reading his stories, one feels that Carver chooses to focus on society, which might very well be absurd.

It may also be that the society which Carver has chosen to represent is antithetical to epiphanies. As Arthur Saltzman points out, "Facing a world reality that, according to the consensus of recent fiction, is decentered and unsystematical at best and nonsensical at worst, the focused and stable meaning that epiphany suggests has been outdated for generations" (14). Carver’s characters are in the throes of this decentered reality, where we grasp for meaning more than ever and feel its absence more acutely.

And yet it is exactly this lack of meaning and absence of epiphany within the text that give it meaning without. The presence of an epiphany within a short story ultimately confines its meaning somewhat to the text. There is a sense of closure to a fictional world whose meaning arises from within the story itself. In epiphanic stories, a reader may glean meaning and even give some back (since all fiction depends on readers to actualize meaning) but it is a matter of realizing that which is established inside the text, not of creating the significance that the characters want. Carver’s fiction is left open, unresolved, almost gaping in its lack of resolution. The reader becomes an increasingly active participant as she finishes these open-ended stories. Through identification with the texts, the reader gives the
characters the meaning for which they fought. As Hallett so aptly says, "final meaning (closure) still lies outside the text and beyond the author’s intent; it lies with the reader" (14).

I have stated already that it is precisely the characters’ lack of meaning that alleviates our own. We believe that their lives are meaningful but we know that they don’t, which makes us re-examine those things within ourselves that we “understand” as meaningless. We see their alienation and recognize our own, thus feeling companionship through loneliness and miscommunication.

It is tempting to say that although there are no epiphanies within Carver stories, their very absence makes it possible for readers to have epiphanies in their own lives. However, the meaning that readers get is slightly different than epiphany in its subtlety and its transience. An epiphany is said to be “a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary 764), yet what readers receive through Carver stories is not a flash but a process. The difference between the two is slippery since both include a “…grasp of reality through something usually simple and striking (as a common-place event or person)” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary 764). But the spiritual phenomenon through Carver is interactive and necessarily momentary whereas epiphanies come upon characters/readers with, as Saltzman points out, at least a seemingly stable meaning (14).

The absence of epiphanies, in some ways, mirrors the narrative style of Carver’s stories. The narration in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? and What We Talk About When We Talk About Love is not self-assertive and stays close to the characters, which, along with the subject-matter, allows for the specific identification with characters that I have laid out. This is not to say that identification with characters is not possible with distant (from the plot, not the text) or self-assertive narrators, only that the connection we receive from Carver stories is dependent on the absence of these qualities. A strongly independent narrative
presence or one that is obviously “beyond” the characters provides an outside voice with
which the reader may identify. When the distance in voice is minimized so is the option not
to connect with the characters described.

The alienation and meaninglessness that Carver stories depict is not pleasant. We do
not want to relate to these attitudes, although we can, or admit to their presence in our own
lives. We might be inclined to separate ourselves from the characters and even look
condescendingly towards them when given a “wiser” voice to view them through. The
presence of such a narrator would, like epiphanies, impede the interaction and identification
with the characters that are necessary for transcendence. It is, then, Carver’s choice of close
and unassuming first-person and third-person narrators that allows for spirituality within the
reading experience.

For example, the first-person narration in “Night School” prevents us from moving
beyond where the (unnamed) main character is throughout the story. We begin in a bar
where two women want the narrator to drive them to their night school professor’s house as a
joke. We consider it alongside him, as if we are present in his half-drunk, listless mind,
participating but uninvested in the small talk being made:

“I mean,” she said, “what do you plan to do? What’s your
big goal in life? Everybody has a big goal in life.”

I raised my empty glass to the bartender. He took it and
drew me another beer. I counted out some change, which left me
with thirty cents from the two dollars I’d started out with a couple
of hours ago. She was waiting.

“Teach. Teach school,” I said. (Will You Please... 95)

Although the narration is in the past tense, it does not allow us to foresee the end of the story.
We do not fully understand the narrator’s hopelessness until he tells his father and us,

“That’s okay,” I said. ‘I don’t need the car. I’m not going anywhere” (100).

Carver’s third-person narrators are no more knowledgeable and also provide the
reader only with the information that the characters have. The narration in “The Student’s
Wife” keeps us close to the story; we follow the main character as we did in “Night School.” At first we feel fine, as she seems to, but we begin to feel strange as her husband starts to go to sleep and she is left alone, awake, something obviously wrong. Her life is unfulfilling and although we aren’t told that, we can tell from her actions and interactions. She tries, unsuccessfully, to get her husband to comfort her, “She said, ‘You’re asleep, Mike. I wish you’d want to talk.’ ‘All right,’ he said, not moving. ‘Just hold me and get me off to sleep. I can’t go to sleep,’ she said” (Will You Please... 127). We are aware that something is bothering her and can identify with the common feeling of panicked loneliness that accompanies insomnia:

She turned onto her side and then onto her back again. And then she began to feel afraid, and in one unreasoning moment of longing she prayed to go to sleep.

Please, God, let me go to sleep.
She tried to sleep.
“Mike,” she whispered.
There was no answer. (129)

We watch her night deteriorate and we feel the specific isolation that comes from trying to keep busy when you’re the only one awake. We feel this because she does and because we know it from our own experience, not from the narrator explaining it to us. We are no more enlightened about her situation than she is when “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).

Carver stories are usually told through first and third-person limited narration but even Carver’s rare omniscient narrators are not overwhelmingly “all-knowing.” For example, the omniscient narrator in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” only allows us insight into Ralph’s thoughts, rather than having all the characters’ emotions exposed. Mieke Bal, in Narratology, credits this type of insight to focalization, which is “the relation between the vision and that which is ‘seen,’ perceived” (142). According to Bal, the focalizer (the
view through which we see the story) differs from narrative voice and can be found within a character or characters (internal focalization) or outside the plot (external focalization) (148).

“If the focalizer coincides with the character,...[t]he reader watches with the character’s eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character” (146). In “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” the focalization remains with Ralph and we identify with him. In fact, the focalizer is stable throughout the entire collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*; it is always connected to a single character. When the focalizer switches from character to character or remains externally “objective,” the reader’s identification with characters is less intimate. The stable, internal focalization in Carver stories keeps narrative distance at bay and makes it possible for readers to concentrate intensely on a character’s thoughts and actions.

Our movement with the characters lets us easily understand their situations because we are not put in a superior position to them. If we saw something about their lives that they didn’t, we could look smugly at their search for meaning and not get involved. But it is only when contemplating their lack of meaning and identifying with it that we may come to our meaningfulness. An overbearing narrator might get in the way of the interactive relationship that we have with these characters by allowing us distance from the alienation and meaninglessness that the characters experience. In addition, self-conscious narration and realized meaning in the stories would imbue them with a more grandiose sense and thereby take away their potential to show us life’s quotidian details because we would be too caught up in their greater themes. It is only through recognizing the character’s daily habits, surroundings, and experiences that we then come to a larger meaning about these things in their lives and our own.
Part Three: Post-Carver

Your thought can only embrace what is sunned.¹²

The intent of this essay is to show how reading Carver was for me a spiritual experience and examine the possible reasons for this. It does not attempt to show the indisputably miraculous nature of fiction or claim that Carver is a savior of any kind. As I have said already, the spiritual experience that I had was fleeting. I am not experiencing it as I write this, which is why the description of it has been so difficult for me. If the transcendence gained through Carver wasn’t fleeting I would be spending more time proselytizing and less time writing. But if this experience is gone, then what do I have? And why couldn’t it stay longer?

It is our desire for the ordinary that initially satisfies us in Carver’s fiction, in much the same way that we are satisfied by Oprah’s “Favorite Things.” This level of satisfaction doesn’t last for long because it is only the “quick fix” of realism that I referred to earlier, one in which we grab onto anything to make sense of our lives. But we are still disaffected by this reality because we have not located its meaning; we have not soothed our ultimate concern. This is where Oprah and Carver part ways in their representations of the real. Carver gives us meaning and connection through his depiction of alienation and meaninglessness. We cannot find the full significance in our own estranged quotidian existences until we see this meaninglessness in the existence of others. Oprah and others like her show us the mundane without the deeper portrayal of the listless human condition. Her mundane, therefore, remains shallow and seemingly unimportant while Carver’s temporarily gains transcendence as it acts as a door to a situation where alienation and meaninglessness can be alleviated.

The fleetingness of this phenomenon is partly due to the fact that these experiences are of the ordinary linking us to the extraordinary, and the ordinary must stay such by its very
nature. Just as Carver shows the reader glimpses of the quotidian, so too do we see glimpses of the transcendent through the ordinary. Carver does not solve our ultimate concern of finding meaning and connection. But his fiction can for a moment provide us with enough of a sense of these things that we continue to hope for them.

The momentary nature of the spiritual experience is usually linked to a suspension of thought, which is not sustainable. However, the transcendence achieved through Carver is very much tied to thinking. We consider the characters and ourselves, and assume the existence of others whom we might eventually connect with. Even with these thoughts, though, the experience is somewhat pre-reflective. We think throughout it, but we do not reflect on that thinking. The experience at once demands that we are self-conscious and that we are not. We must be immediately conscious of our lives in order to recognize them in the text, but we can not have a layered consciousness in which we are reflecting on our immediate one. In other words, for true transcendence to occur we must be fully immersed in the reading/identifying and not at all disassociated from our present selves. Once we have the ability to reflect on our connections, the immediate sense of spirituality is gone and we are out of the experience.

The necessity to stop being self-voyeuristic during these episodes may seem contradictory to what I set up in part one. There I argued that disassociation and self-voyeurism were necessary to be able to see our own quotidian. This is true. The museum effect allows us to see ourselves as we haven’t before. However, it is not the recognition of the ordinary that is spiritual (we recognize it rather frequently), it is the meaning we get from that recognition: the sense that it’s important, the feeling that others share these ordinary things and large emotions. Although recognition of the ordinary and meaning are closely tied together in the moment, if we could freeze the instant we might be able to see that the self-voyeurism that points out what we take for granted must end in order to achieve the meaning
which then comes. Once we temporarily set aside the tendency to observe ourselves, we can experience an essence. Only after we are conscious of our mundane occurrences can we connect with those of the characters and imagine others in the same situations.

One thing that makes these particular instances so meaningful is the fact that we rarely exist in such an un-self-observing state. Because of our obsession with the ordinary, which leads to the museum effect and vice versa, we go about our daily lives as if people are watching. This makes us either reflective or anticipatory— we think about what we just did, we think about what we are about to do, or we think about what we are doing in terms of how it will be thought of. This tendency prevents pure experiences, because all of our actions are influenced by a hypothetical viewer, who we then become. We cannot exist permanently in the moment, or in a pre-reflective state, and therefore, our spiritual reading is transitory.

Still, the moments of spirituality do not simply leave us as suddenly as they came. Carver is not a savior, but his fiction does have resonance beyond a flash of revelation. One indication of this is the way that I have carried my initial reading with me for over a year, choosing to make it the focus of my honors essay. I still gain meaning from my first reading experience and enjoy reflecting on it, although I’m no longer enthralled by it. The meaning I glean from reflecting on this experience is not the knock-down emotional one that I first had but a slower, more rational examination of what it pointed to: our link/separation from the ordinary, our sense of alienation, and the potential of fiction, specifically Carver’s, to address these situations.

But it is not only the desire to examine my reading experience academically that Carver has left me with. Mostly, the remnants from my reading are much more constant, quotidian even. They are, in actuality, the museum effect. I can’t say that reading Carver alone leads us to experience the museum effect but I can say that Carver joins a host of cultural aspects that together cause it, including television (Oprah’s “Favorite Things,”
“down-to-earth” commercials, reality shows), magazines (where we read gossip about the most mundane activities), and literature/fiction (such as writing by Carver, Fox, Moody).

To go back to the first section of my essay, the museum effect is the result of watching other people’s quotidian worlds. Since we cannot help but think about our own quotidian lives when we see other people’s, we imagine ourselves in their positions and become self-voyeurs. Presenting the ordinary has become so ubiquitous, although we still see it as a new phenomenon, that we have adopted this self-voyeurism/imagined spectatorship, or museum effect, permanently. The museum effect depends on disassociation and yet disassociation necessarily separates our thoughts from our circumstances. There is a paradox in this: we want the ordinary to give us realism so that we better understand our lives (since we see realism as that which reflects life) but by seeing it through the prism of the museum effect, we remove ourselves further from our sense of true experiences.

The paradox continues in the way that the museum effect helps lead to spirituality in the reading experiences of Carver and prevents them from remaining spiritual. This prevention goes back to the way the museum effect works and how we eventually begin to see the quotidian that Carver points out.

When we are done reading these stories we begin to think about our reading experience and the way that it made us look at the ordinary. It is this post-reading reflection that prevents the spiritual experience from continuing, because it takes us out of the exposed, honest state that we must have in order to make conclusions and connections through Carver and places us in a self-conscious frame of mind that feels less immediately true. The museum effect requires separation but separating from the thought/experiential process you are going through as you read and connect forces you to let go of some of the essence of that experience.
When I put down *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and returned to my regular life, I took with me the knowledge that for a moment my quotidian was both transcended and transcendent. Although the reading experience was over, my everyday was not; I then took Carver into those experiences. In such a “museum” frame of mind, we are hyper-aware of our everyday, viewing our lives through expected meaning. It is at this point that we begin to long for the confidence that came with our reading of Carver. We anticipate a similar experience, one that will once again connect us to personal and universal truth (sans scare quotes). We give our current ordinary lives meaning by remembering a time when they had it (while reading Carver). But while better than none, the meaning we attribute to our lives post-Carver is less acute than the actual reading experience because its nature is retrospective rather than immediate.

Although it may seem as if we should bemoan the museum effect’s tendency to sever us from true experience, it has beneficial aspects as well. While the museum effect might seem extreme, some form of reflection is inevitable. How much more extreme is it to envision a life in which we never have the distance from our experiences that self-consciousness provides? Also, the meaning we get from Carver is in some way indebted to the museum effect. It is this effect that allows us to view our quotidian in such a way that we can relate to others. And even after the initial sense of connection has left us, we cannot realize that it occurred and afford it meaning in our lives unless we reflect on it. This spirituality thus takes on another dimension of meaning when we are removed from it because we want to get it back; it shows us potential. The inevitable idealization of the reading is then an extended part of the spiritual experience because it manages to give us hope for another one.

The museum effect that we have after reading Carver may cause us to read into our reality but it at least gives us the space to appreciate it, which, according to Tillich, we are
normally unable to do yet desperately need to. The danger is that, as I have indicated, the museum effect causes the ordinary to become the dominant mode of understanding our reality. We know that it should be meaningful to us, even though it isn’t, so we may begin to cultivate our own and others’ quotidian. We talk about our ordinary so much that we kill its meaning through overexposure rather than under.

But no matter how much meaning we force onto the ordinary, the truly mundane will stay such or else will cease to be mundane. Once something is the “hot topic” it is no longer ignored, can no longer be discovered, and cannot be considered ordinary. So even the quotidian that becomes glamorized either returns to normal or stops being quotidian. Carver’s fiction manages, both in spite of and because of the museum effect, to make the ordinary poignant, be it the ordinary that has never been recognized or the ordinary that has seemed to lose its meaning.

Unfortunately, though, Carver cannot give this spiritual experience twice, since its very nature is to be unexpected and immediate. I have been moved in each subsequent reading of Carver and can guess in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love which stories might have imparted a feeling of transcendence in me, however I can no longer feel it in the same way through his stories. It’s often thought that the more you read a text, the more you understand it and the more you get out of it. This is not in keeping with the reading of Carver that I have described, whose truest beauty comes on the first reading, when we are unprepared for what it will give us. What my post-Carver thinking does continue to give me is a reminiscence of transcendence and the confidence that I may find it again elsewhere.
Reflections

Question of the year: what is this essay about? Throughout the past twelve months the answer has shifted, changed, disappeared. April: Carver and Schleiermacher, June-August: not sure, October: Carver, December: spirituality, January: nothing, February: the ordinary, March: Carver, April: all of it. One would think that my confidence in the project would have come in and out of focus as my subjects did. Actually, that’s only partly the case. Throughout this time, I have always had the sense that the essence of my experience encapsulated all these shifting subjects. I have been able, through the writing process, to tame the concepts that raged in my head and have managed at least a personal victory in turning them into this essay. With the sense of having laid out at least something of what I aimed to say, the focus of my questions has switched from the subject of the essay to the essay itself. Just when I thought that I’d completed my thinking, I began to grapple with the notions of academic credibility and success in terms of my readers.

This essay is about exploring an encounter with Raymond Carver’s fiction that has yet to be given full acknowledgement. It is an encounter of spirituality through the ordinary, meaning our mundane activities and our everyday alienation. Critics have discussed Carver’s ability to impart intense reader reaction mostly in terms of the characters’ terror from self-voyeurism being manifested in ourselves. When Carver is said to be tapping into something more positive it is in his most obviously hopeful stories. Both of these views believe too much in a reading that mirrors its subject-matter. They forget that Carver stories dictate nothing and in their openness allow us to come to different conclusions than their protagonists. These are conclusions of connection-- with ourselves to our daily existences and with others against the prevailing alienation of our time. This spiritual recognition is one that occurs not through Carver’s more optimistic stories but through his most dismal characters and limited revelations.
I have tried to make this essay not only about the temporary salvific power of reading Carver, but also about a specific kind of transcendent experience and how Raymond Carver's fiction can provide it. In this sense, my point is as much about an occurrence that has resonance far beyond fiction as it is about how Carver's fiction transgresses and challenges traditional notions of literary boundaries. But how does the spirituality I espouse fit into academia?

I have situated my claims in both theology and literary criticism. But have I succeeded in bringing spirituality to readers and the academy? A successfully academic essay would be one with which others could enter into a dialogue. By this I mean that the essay should provoke opinion, respond to other material in the field, and invite (even begrudgingly) criticism. While I see myself responding to critical work in expressing what such work always seems to stop just short of, could this essay (or others like it in structure and subject) ever enter into academic discourse? In my choice to write through my own feelings and experiences, as well as describe an ineffable topic, have I resisted criticism and in doing so resisted the conversation necessary for academic acceptance?

More importantly, where has my essay left my readers? While I hope to have bestowed, even in my imperfect descriptions, some belief in spirituality through quotidian estrangement, I have prevented my readers from feeling it through Carver. My explication has hindered Carver's potential to take a reader into surprise transcendence. In my efforts to explore my own experience and acknowledge Carver's role in it, I may have cut my essay off from its discourse and cut Carver off from my readers.

These are the problems with which I have struggled and continue to struggle. And yet, just as I had confidence in my topic despite its evasiveness, I now must have confidence in the value of this essay, despite its possible exclusion from "unbiased" dialogue. Privileging honesty, I believe that my arguments would have been far less successful if they
had been extracted from their personal nature and made to appear objective when they were not.

I take the problem of distancing my readers from Carver more seriously than those issues surrounding personal composition, since in this essay I identify myself more as a reader than a critic. I do believe that I have partially bankrupted Carver’s fiction by praising it and see this paradox as inevitable. However, the most important aspect that I take from my interaction with Carver is faith. The power of my reading lies partly in the way it has revealed an experience beyond my own. I trust that Carver is not the only key to transcendence and just as I maintain that I will find it again, I have faith that my readers will discover this spirituality elsewhere.
Notes

1 I will be specifically referring to the collections Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? and What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. I have chosen not to discuss Carver’s later works because their style and themes do not generally spark the reading experience I am examining.


3 Cathedral is generally acknowledged to be fuller in language and less dismal in subject than the two earlier collections and, therefore, does not impart the same experience. Since I have neither the time or space to go into a comparison in style and reaction, Cathedral, along with Carver’s other later works, does not come into my discussion.

4 (Tillich 43)

5 I say “loss of truth” not to suggest that there ever was absolute truth but because postmodern thought has paradoxically led us to both question the nature of truth and romanticize past eras where such questions were irrelevant. In this way we feel as if we have lost something that we’re not even sure we believe in.

6 The American Heritage Dictionary states that theology is “An organized body of opinions concerning God and man’s relationship to God” (704). As I will show through Feuerbach, the spirituality I refer to comes from a clearer understanding of this God/man relationship.

7 (Carver, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love 124)

8 (Feuerbach 6)

9 When I say that there is nothing beyond human consciousness, I am not saying that there can be nothing greater, only that we are unable to conceptualize anything greater than ourselves so anything greater than our minds could not enter into them.

10 At least, epiphanies are not present in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? and What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. They may be in some of his later stories, which in my opinion, do not encompass many of the Carver details that create transcendence.

11 While I have chosen not to concentrate on Carver as a minimalist, I don’t have a problem with others categorizing him as such. Carver himself didn’t like the term because of its seemingly negative connotations. I don’t find the term negative and see how it may apply to Carver’s fiction but for the purposes of my discussion I feel that it is not especially useful. The reading experience that I am focusing on is rich in nature, far from the spare associations of minimalism.

12 (Schleiermacher 41)

13 I was at first tempted to utilize more of Schleiermacher’s theories and say that these moments were purely experiential and by doing so say that when thought returns, the spiritual leaves. “Wherefore as soon as you have made any given definite activity of your soul an object of communication or of contemplation, you have already begun to separate” (Schleiermacher 41). Although these moments are experiential, I do not want to separate experience and thought. I agree with Tillich’s critique of Schleiermacher on this point: “...he cut ‘feeling’...off from intellect, thus excluding religion from the totality of personal existence and delivering it to emotional subjectivity” (Tillich 24).

14 As I have already established, part of what makes the quotidian appealing is the sense that we are seeing people’s hidden lives or things that aren’t normally thought of as interesting. However, we also know this not to be the case. We see that the quotidian is just as interesting and just as covered as the glamorous and yet we still think of it as voyeuristic to catch glances of it.

15 Of course, there are many other ways one could read Carver, which may benefit from multiple readings. I am speaking specifically of a transcendent one.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


