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Less is More: The Power Style in Raymond Carver's and Mary Robison's

Selected Short Stories

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إياد

Less is More: The Power Style in Raymond Carver's and Mary Robison's Selected Short Stories

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Abstract

Raymond Carver's (1938-1988) is one of the major American writers of short stories writers. Since he appeared, he has been called the greatest short story writer since Hemingway, as well as the godfather of literary minimalism. His books have been called minimalist masterpieces that explore with careful starkness and understatement of purity of emptiness. Another important modern minimalist short story writer is Mary Robison(1949). Mary Robison's reputation as a member of the new generation of American short stories writers has steadily increased in recent years. The focus of her attention is on small, apparently insignificant, events which touch, limit, and thus illuminate the lives of ordinary people. The main aim of this study is to formulate a definition of minimalism and how Raymond Carver used the style of less is more in his major short stories' collections: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* (1976), *What We Talk About When Talk About Love* (1981), *Cathedral* (1983) and *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). It will also illustrate how Mary Robison is like Carver in using few details that meant a lot in her short story collections *An Amateur's Guide to the Night* (1983) and *Believe Them* (1988). This study will reveal that in order for a minimalist's work to be successful, both extreme brevity and extreme singleness of effect must be presented.

Keywords: Minimalism, Less is more, Brevity, Power Style.

المستخلص

"المختصر المفيد": رصانة الأسلوب في القصص القصيرة المختارة لكل من ريموند كارفر وماري روبسون

يعتبر ريموند كارفر (1938-1988) واحداً من أهم الكتاب الأمريكيين في مجال القصص القصيرة بعد هيمنجواي، فقد أطلق النقاد عليه لقب الأب الروحي لأدب البساطة منذ ظهوره وذلك لإكتشافه دقة معاني الكلمات مع البقاء علي الإجاز، تعتبر الكاتبة ماري روبسون كذلك واحدة من أهم الكتاب الأمريكيين لقصص التقليدية في العصر الحديث وذلك لأن أهتمامتها كانت منصبة علي التفاصيل الصغيرة الدقيقة للأحداث فرغم ضالتها وأختصارها إلا إنها كانت تلمس وتضيء حياة الأشخاص العاديين بمعانيها الواسعة. إن الغرض من هذه الدراسة صياغة تعريف لكلمة أدب البساطة وكيفية إستخدام كارفر لأسلوب "المختصر المفيد" في أهم أعماله القصصية ، وتهدف الدراسة أيضاً إلي أعمال روبسون القصصية والتي تهتم مثل كارفر في إستخدامها للأساليب الموجزة التي تعني الكثير في دلالتها. ولهذا فإن هذه الدراسة تبرهن علي أن العمل الناجح لقصص البساطة القصيرة يجب أن يتوافر فيها عنصر الإيجاز الشديد، المختصر المفيد بالإضافة إلي عنصر التأثير المنفرد الواقع علي القاريء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدب البساطة، المختصر المفيد، الإيجاز الشديد، كثرة الدلالة.

Less is More: The Power Style in Raymond Carver's and Mary Robison's Major Short Stories

Raymond Carver's (1938-1988) is one of the major American writers of short stories. Since he appeared, he has been called "the greatest short story writer since Hemingway" (Robert Stone 58), as well as "the godfather of literary minimalism" (Robert Coover 7). His books have been called "minimalist masterpieces" that explore with careful starkness and understatement of purity of emptiness" (Erich Eichman 86). Critics' point of view about Raymond Carver suggests that greatness in art is and always will be linked to the threat of new-to dangerous innovation, and innovative style; and it suggests that an age-old argument is still a debate about brevity and what is and isn't the soul of wit.

Another important modern minimalist short story writer is Mary Robison(1949). Mary Robison's reputation as a member of the new generation of American short stories writers has steadily increased in recent years. The focus of her attention is on small, apparently insignificant, events which touch, limit, and thus illuminate the lives of ordinary people. "Critics have noted the tight economy of her stories, her approach to characterization with its decided emphasis on showing rather than telling, and the quiet notes of humor and irony that punctuate her work " (The World of fiction online: 2).

The main aim of this study is to formulate a definition of minimalism and how Raymond Carver used the style of less is more in his major short stories' collections: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* (1976), *What We Talk About When Talk About Love* (1981), *Cathedral* (1983) and *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). It will also illustrate how Mary Robison is like Carver in using few details that meant a lot in her short story collections *An Amateur's Guide to the Night* (1983) and *Believe Them* (1988). This study will reveal that in order for a minimalist's work to

be successful, both extreme brevity and extreme singleness of effect must be presented.

In literary analysis the term "minimalism" is "characterized by an economy with words. Readers are expected to take an active role in the creation of a story, to choose sides based on oblique hints and innuendo, rather than reacting to direction from the author". The characters in minimalist stories and novels tend to be unexceptional; they are average people who sell pool supplies or coach second tier athletic teams, not famous detectives or the fabulously wealthy. Generally, the short stories are "slice of life" stories (World of Fiction: online 4).

Minimalism is considered by many critics to be a major contributing factor to the current short story renaissance. Yet the critics who make this claim nearly always condemn writers labeled minimalists. The works of such writers are said to lack action, depth, philosophical ideas, a sense of history, a sense of morality and variation. Further, they are said to completely lack a sense of tradition. The criticism is harsh, but the term itself has never been defined.

Writers of super-short stories with minimal plots and characters appear to suggest more about human nature than they actually tell. These writers follow traditional theory so closely that they are able to push established literary principles to their extremes.

Traditional theory on the short story, as found in Poe's 1842 review of Hawthorne's first collection of stories, begins with the idea that two elements are essential to the success of a short story---brevity form and singleness of effect. According to Poe, "----the unity of effect ---is a point of the greatest importance--- this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed in one sitting" (Edger Allan Poe 1255). He continues by maintaining that

in order to achieve this desired length and effect no word should be added to a story that is not part of the pre-established design.

Inherent to minimalism, this "less is more" philosophy was first applied practically to the short story by Hemingway. In an effect to make readers feel something more than they understood with his short, narrowly-focused stories, Hemingway used some technical devices. He used word economy, simple language, straight-forward style and a "show, don't tell" approach.

Despite its roots in the tradition of the short story, minimalism is viewed strictly in a contemporary light; critics find reasons for the attraction to the very short stories in modern society. Madison Bell for example points out that contemporary stories are shorter because of shortened attention spans and of the decline in national reading and writing skills (65). Raymond Carver commented that his stories are short because his economic situation limited the amount of time he could spend on a single story. In "Fiction of Occurrence and Consequence", an essay included in *No Heroics, Please*, Carver stated:

When a reader finishes a wonderful story and lays it aside, he should have to pause for a minute and collect himself. At this , if the writer has succeeded, there ought to be a unity of feeling and understanding. Or, if not a unity, at least a sense that the disparities of a crucial situation have been made available in a new light, and we can go on from there. (150)

Bobbie Ann Mason revealed that her characters dictate the length of her stories: "Many of my characters live boring lives---it might be difficult to live with them for a whole novel" (Gullenplan 32).

Critics vary in their interpretation of minimalism. Cynthia Ozick accuses minimalists of using a style so simple that their sentences lack syntactical complexity. Further, they are charged with being unable to articulate "other-than

basic thoughts and feelings" with the limited vocabularies they use (Barth 25). Hence, John Barth approaches a definition of the term, "minimalism", when he explains that short story, old or new, can be minimalist in terms of form; it can be a super short story, made up of short sentences and short paragraphs. Second, a work can be minimalist in terms of style; it can have as stripped-down syntax that avoids complex subordinating constructions, a simple vocabulary and non-emotive tone (2). Arthur Bethea defines minimalism as a "style privileging economy, simple diction, clear syntax, and omission—such as commentary from an omniscient narrator—to provide an authoritative meaning for the presented experience"(101). Kirk Curnutt emphasizes minimalism's connection to "a basic theme, the failure of the spoken word"(246). Minimalists argue, on the other hand, that basic thoughts and feelings are extremely important and that using simple words allows them to better emulate real conversations. Typically leaving out characters' pasts and hints at futures, minimalists make it nearly impossible to judge the action of these characters or to determine whether or not they will overcome the obstacles presented in the stories. Because the characters are underdeveloped, readers are often left with only a sense of their apathy, their common inability to communicate and their usually under-explained despair. Michal Gorra describes minimalist prose as "----so attenuated that it can't support the weight of past or a future, but only a bare notation of what happens, now"(155).

The major defender of this mode of writing, Frederick Barthelme, who refers to himself as a "convicted minimalist," claims that the mere glimpse minimalists offer allows readers to wonder about their characters, just as they wonder about the real people they encounter. After all, people seldom know the hidden motivations behind what others do. And rather than filling readers' heads with only the author's ideas, according to Barthelme, allow readers to judge for themselves (Guttenplan 33).

The scope of minimalist plots is limited as well. Charged with avoiding well-constructed plots, minimalists create stories that do not have a beginning, middle and end, after the action has already taken place. And rather than having concrete endings (or resolutions to their conflicts), they have what D.D Guttenplan refers to as a "frozen moment", which occurs in the middle of a situation that cannot be redeemed (33). Thus, the stories seem to be chronicles that stop abruptly rather than end, and they "unveil the latent value in single incidents" (May 6).

Minimalist art or literature does not offer solutions. Instead, it attempts to shake us out of our complacency and show us daily life in its beauty and horror. Thus, in the minimalists' stories the gaps and unexplained material generate dialogue and speculation: Why? Where? Who? What is the author trying to say? Readers come up with their own moral judgment of the characters, narrator, world created, and author. If they come to an expected resolution, expecting a problem to be solved, their response is usually, "I don't get this" or "so what". It is the reader's responsibility to make comparisons, contrasts and to understand and criticize the characters, narrator, author and society.

Minimalism of tone-or the practice of leaving out details that hint at author's attitudes is also attacked. Many critics and non-minimalist writers maintain that the short story should be more expressive. "Less remains less", writes Ozick, "I don't know whether it's minimalism or incapacity. There's so little on the page that you can't make a judgment---it's like data menu prose---. There's no wit in it, no joy in it, there's no sympathy" (Guttemplan 33). By omitting the details that would make readers feel compassion for his characters, readers left to judge for themselves. But readers on the other hand do not know how they have acted in the past and have very little information about how they will act in the future.

Technically, minimalist stories are impressive. They illustrate that less certainly can be more by showing that brief works using simple language can express a great deal. They often have the unique ability, for example, to explore difficult topics without being sentimental. In stories where the subject might otherwise be unbearable, minimalist writing allows readers to approach the frightening and look at it from an objective point of view. In order to achieve that, minimalists require participation. A.L.Bader stated, "stories requiring reader response can be rewarding"(73) and in my own point of view it is obviously true.

The best way to understand what we talk when we talk about Carver's style is, to look searching into the stories themselves, to observe them with a minimum of external clutter, avoiding the ready snares of definitions, sticky terminologies. What is it, we must ask ourselves, that makes these stories as powerful as they are ? How does Carver's style collaborate with his subjects, with the fictive universe of his art ?

To answer those questions, we must look deeply into the mechanics of the stories, prodding and unraveling the mysterious, seemingly unapproachable heart of Carver's craft—is to put ourselves in danger of writing a sterile technical treatise on style, which seems far from ideal. While the majority of Carver's stories are spare, those in *What We Talk About* push minimalism to its extreme. There is certainly no question about its extreme brevity. One glance at the book tells readers that this collection is unique. The only thing lengthy about it is its title. Its form is super short. When paging through the book, abundant white space immediately catches the eye, revealing short, one-sentence paragraphs. Of the seventeenth stories in the volume, the longest story is eighteen pages and the average are only eight pages.

Carver's style, tone and material help produce the extreme brevity and singleness of effect of this volume. Excluding everything that he feels is not required to make the stories work, Carver presents only the facts. Like Hemingway, he relies

on subject-verb-object sentence constructions and rarely varies his sentences from paragraph to paragraph and story to story. Further, he uses virtually no adjectives and adverbs, very few metaphors and no allusions.

What We Talk About is able to strike nerves and make readers uneasy with so few words and such simplicity partially because its stories are primarily made up of dialogue. Part of the effect they achieve is due to the elliptical nature of the conversations; very seldom do characters finish complete thoughts when they speak. This, in turn, makes the conversations seem very quick and more realistic. In "Gazebo", for example, the dialogue, which is in the standard minimalist first person, is fairly convincing: "I go 'Holly, this can't continue. This has got to stop'--- she goes, 'Duane this is killing me'---'I've had it', she goes"(10). Here, Carver manages to prevent the narrator as if he were a friend. And in order to fully appreciate what he does in this story, readers must participate; they must be willing to take on the role of this character's confidant. Certain expectations come with this role. First, readers must assume, with the narrator, that they already knew the other characters personally or at least that they know something about them. Readers must assume this knowledge because Carver omits details that the narrator would not have to tell a friend. Second, they must be willing to act as a sounding board; in this story, as in many others, the narrative seems to need someone to listen to him. Like the girl in "Why Don't You Dance?" he is "trying to get it talked out" (160).

The dialogue in every story in this volume is attributed as simply as in "Gazebo". By using "I go", "I say" or "I said", Carver demands that readers fill in the missing pieces---details that adverbs would traditionally reveal. This task is made easier by Carver's precision. By describing in exact terms the characters' ordinary actions (such as picking up a glass from a table), he is able to suggest that emotions such as depression and hostility are present while readers are left with the task of making all final decisions in determining how things happen in these stories, the

narrative are so well constructed that the only doubt left in readers' minds is usually the haunting doubt that Carver intends to leave intends to leave there. His intention is to illustrate that what seems less means more to him and to his readers.

While Carver intends for readers to feel emotions such as extreme anxiety when reading these stories, his minimalism of tone in his work is a bit perplexing. While he has told various critics that he has compassion for his characters and has maintained that readers are not supposed to see them as helpless people in hopeless situations, it is often difficult to empathize with them because, like most minimalist characters, they are difficult to judge. By removing excess information, then, Carver also effectively removes his own attitudes from his work.

The best example of a story that illustrates this extreme minimalism of tone is "Why Don't You Dance?" In this story, readers find a man drinking and staring out the window at his furniture, which is arranged in his yard exactly as it had been in his house. His relationship with his wife or lover has fallen apart, she has obviously gone and, as one may guess, his life has been turned inside out. Carver never explains, however, what has happened before. With the paragraph, "His side. Her side", he has separated them. He does not tell readers, however, that she has not died. Further, readers see so little of the unnamed man in the story that they cannot be sure that he was not to blame for his own problems. Perhaps he abused his wife or threw her out. On the other hand, perhaps she abused him. Based on their own experiences, rather than on what is on the page, readers must fill in the blanks.

Many times, this minimalist technique leaves readers with a dilemma. By omitting the details that would make readers feel compassion for his characters, such as their thoughts, ambitions and feelings, Carver makes his characters' targets are for contempt. Readers, left to judge for themselves, may feel, as Bell points out, that they want to shake some sense into these characters (65). Readers may want to tell

the characters that they should begin to care about their own lives if they expect anyone else to. They might also want to include a few words on alcohol and drug abuse, pride and responsibility.

Yet on the basis of the text, readers cannot judge these characters too harshly. Readers see them disregarding those who care about them, avoiding their problems, failing to defend themselves and occasionally resorting to violence. But while the characters do not accomplish great things during the stories, readers, in most cases, do not know how they have acted in the past and have very little information about how they will act in the future.

A striking contrast to the type of character found in *What We Talk About* can be found in one of Carver's last seven stories. In "Elephant" the narrator finds his strength, and surprisingly in a Carver story, finds the optimistic side of an otherwise troubled life. He can be seen, in fact, as admirable. The story begins with the man mourning his lack of control over his life. The people who should care about him-his ex-wife, adult children, brother and mother demand that he supports them financially and fail to show him the slightest bit of affection. Wanting to sum from his problems, he goes to sleep and dream about his father and his once- happy marriage. He then dreams of friends offering him a drink. Upon washing, he realizes that he does have something to be very thankful for--- his ability to turn down alcohol after his struggle with alcoholism. Suddenly happy, he realizes that while he cannot control everything, he can avoid the most difficult obstacle that has faced him in life.

Like his character, all of Carver's characters, could have more control over their lives if they would communicate. As the titles of all but one of his collections imply, this theme dominates all of his work. In all but two stories, Carver writes about people who cannot talk to each other. "A Serious talk" (*What We Talk*

About), for example, revolves around a lack of communication. In this story, a man yearns to tell his ex-wife that he misses the life they shared; he misses the pride he once took in her, he misses his home, he misses his children. The morning after a holiday disaster, he asks his ex-wife if they can talk about it. When she reluctantly agrees, he begins by making sarcastic small talk about the new man in her life asking what she has in the house to drink. The narrator tells us, "There were things he wanted to say, grieving things, consoling things, things like that". (9) But instead of saying such things, machine takes over the conversation, and when his wife's new man phones, he cuts the phone wires, and thus, cuts all lines of communication. Not realizing what he has done, he reflects: "The thing was, they had to have a serious talk soon. There were things that needed to be talked about, important things that needed to be discussed. They'd talk again" (10). But, like the man in "One More Things", who can't possibly think of what he wants to say to his family, all these characters can think to tell her is that the ashtray she uses is, in fact, a dish.

One of the only stories in which this communication barrier is broken can be found in *Cathedral*, a later volume. In the little story, two unlikely people- a blind man, Robert, and a sight man who believes in the stereotypic image of blind people – come together through the second man's wife and get high watching a television program featuring cathedrals. The sighted man asks Robert if he has any conception of what a cathedral is. Robert decides that he does not and asks the sighted man to describe one for him. When he is unable to do so, Robert asks him if they can draw a cathedral together. Robert holds the other man's hands and they draw. As Robert begins to understand a concept that might otherwise be reserved for the sighted, he asks the sighted man to close his eyes. The sighted man, who is also the narrator, says, "So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life---. 'It's really something', I said"(228).

While this story illustrates the type effect one of Carver's longer, more complex works can have, the more chilling effect of the stories in *What We Talk About* is created with material that is simpler. The characters in this volume, generally men between the ages of 35 and 55, work in factories, repair cars and deliver mail. And while their problems are not always simple, they are usually quite common. The stories are about the things people tend to fear most, including death, divorce, unemployment, crime and sickness such as alcoholism and cancer. Presented in a simple, narrowly-focused manner, these topics hit home like the evening news; they are examined with an urgency that tells readers to beware.

Carver deals with these very serious topics in plots that are most definitely minimalist. His characters become aware that a change has taken place in their lives, even though they may not be sure exactly what it is. Carver's endings, then, tend to leave both the characters and readers asking, "what's next ? "

"Fat", a purely minimalist story from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, for example, simply consists of a waitress telling a friend about serving a very fat man and feeling compassion for him afterwards. The conflict is simple, woman versus herself, and the reasons for this conflict are only implied through her description of the reactions of her friend and her husband. Further, the resolution, if readers choose to call it that, is only that she begins to feel differently: "My life is going to change. I feel it,"(6) she says and, thus, concludes her story.

The plots of Carver's longer stories offer little contrast. In "Feathers"(*Cathedral*), Carver writes about a married couple persuaded to have a child after seeing a friend's affection for his incredibly ugly baby. When they have problems with their own child, the narrator decides that the trouble began that evening. Many years and details are left out, however. Readers are not told how the

couple treated the child and may suspect that the parents are at least partially responsible for these problems.

"The Bath" in *What We Talk About* is another story which indicates that the effect of the longer work is less extreme. It tells about the story of two parents who wait for their small son to recover after he is hit by a can on his birthday. And in both versions, the parents are tormented by phone calls from the baker who prepared the boy's birthday cake, who is unaware of the situation and upset because no one picked up the cake. Carver's aim, I think is to create from these situations two different stories. The aim of the earlier story is to allow readers to empathize with the parents. Because a major detail---whether or not the boy will live--- is left out of this story, readers can very easily share in the anxiety of these characters. With the parents, they wait and listen to the doctor's uncertain words. In the final scene, the mother returns home for a bath and the telephone rings. At this instant, neither the mother nor the reader knows if the hospital is calling to inform her of her son's death. Readers may hold their breath as the mother picks up the phone. Carver ends the story with her terrifying question- is the call about her son? "It has to do with Scotty, yes" (89), the voice answers and, thus, the story ends.

Carver felt that this tension-filled story was too spare and perhaps not compassionate enough. Yet he creates an effect that is difficult to match. By expressing sentiment without being sentimental, the story makes an unbearable topic bearable. Readers can approach the possibility of death with such powerful emotions as fear and uncertainty and not shed a tear because the final outcome is still unknown. I maintain that the extreme brevity and effect of this story make it one of the masterpieces of modern minimalism as well as of American literature.

The aim of the longer version of this story is to illustrate the ability of people to find consolation in the words of strangers during a time of tragedy. Here, Carver

describes the feeling of the parents as they watch their son die-their hope that he will wake up, their shock at his sudden movement and final breath, their reluctance to leave his body behind at the hospital. The details of this very sentimental story can certainly cause tender readers to shed a tear or two. But like the parents, the story must move on. Frustrated by the baker's continuing calls, the parents confront him and find that he is able to help then begin dealing with their grief, something they could not seem to help each other do. With this story, Carver proves that he is able to effectively express compassion in his writing.

The diversity of the body of Carver's work clarifies the term minimalism in two major ways. First, it illustrates that much can be expressed with very few words when extreme brevity and singleness of effect are combined; one need only read a few stories in *What We Talk About* to know that four pages can be explosive. It follows, then, the minimalist narratives can be memorable and will likely be placed among America's finest stories. The term, then does not necessarily refer to inferior writing.

Second, it illustrates the difference between minimalist stories and minimalist techniques. Nearly all elements of a story must be coordinated for it to be purely minimalist. While Carver uses minimalist techniques in all of his stories, only those that are extremely short and narrowly focused can be considered minimalist works. It is this combination that gives minimalism its strength.

Carver, a master of minimalist techniques, pushes the short story form in one direction as he wanted to go. He proceeded to explore its endless possibilities (Gates 70). His skill enabled him to be flexible enough to create works that are both explosive and compassionate.

Mary Robison's short story collections-- *An Amateur's Guide to the Night* (1983) and *Believe Them* (1988) like Carver consist of minimalist stories that are

pared down to a few basic details as well as more generous stories that use minimalist techniques. And just as most of Carver's stories leave behind aftershocks in readers' minds, Robison's stories leave behind a compassion that tends to echo in readers' minds long after they finish reading.

Like Carver's minimalist stories, Robison's combine extreme brevity and singleness of effect. When paging through her collections, readers may notice that although her stories are short and few are super short, her style is more detailed in terms of description but still very simple. Cynthia W. Hallet describes Robison's work as "bleaker and more simplistic than I have ever read it" (online: 2). She does not omit all adjectives and adverbs, but she does avoid elaborate descriptions, therefore, her sentence construction is more varied.

While the tone of Robison's stories is very different from Carver's, it, too, works toward a unique singleness of effect. Readers can quite easily sense what Robison feels and wants them to feel about the characters in most of her stories. An excellent example of this use of tone is a four-page minimalist story entitled "Yours" (*An Amateur's Guide to the Night*). In setting the solemn tone for this story, Robison consistently uses short, powerful paragraphs and subject-verb-object sentence constructions. These elements create an ominous tone when kept constant. The power of such a style in moving readers to compassion is illustrated by the following paragraphs:

"Allison struggled away from her white Renault, limping with the weight of the last of the pumpkins. She found Clark in the twilight on the twig-and leaf-littered porch behind the house. / He wore a wool shawl. He was moving up and back in a padded glider, pushed by the ball of his slippered foot /Allison lowered a big pumpkin, let it rest on the wide floor boards. /Clark was much older-seventy-eight to Allison's thirty. They were married. They were both

quite tall and looked something alike in their facial features. Allison wore a natural-hair wig. It was thick blonde hood around her face. She was dressed in bright-dyed denims today. She wore durable clothes, usually, for she volunteered afternoons at a children's day-care center" ("Yours" 95).

In these few remarkable paragraphs, Robison gives readers a sense of what lies ahead. They are told not only that it is twilight, but also that it is fall, a season with withering twigs and leaves. Readers know, too, that something is wrong. Allison is only 30, yet she is married to a much older man. She struggles, limps and wears a wig. Further, each of facts is stated simply and with a sense of finality.

Robison's narrow focus in this story contributes to the extreme effect it achieves as well. Here, she allows readers to see only a few hours of one relationship. All unnecessary details are left out and most necessary ones are implied. The only background given on either character is that Clark was a surgeon who dabbled in art on weekends. Thus, Robison only implies that the two married because, both being near death, they could relate to each other. Readers can only speculate on how they met and made the decision to marry. Hallet comments on this saying: "Reflected in this puddle of seeming trivia is a poignant, frightening vision of the face and fact of death—and deeper, an even more terrifying apocalypse, the triviality of life" (online: 6).

In this story language and event seem trivial, but the degree of triviality strongly suggests an inverse degree of importance. The part of the relationship that Robison focuses on is filled with sentiment without being sentimental. On Halloween's night, Clark and Allison carve pumpkins and light vigil candles in them as it begins to get dark. Then Allison goes upstairs and begins to die. As she does so, Clark tries to console her, telling her that she has not missed anything. Here, readers see another illustration of minimalism which is that it can make an unbearable.

Another device which Robison has used is the use of the character. She picked up character, a female between the ages of 16 and 25. Despite growing up in the middle of difficult situations that result from family problems, very little background is given on Robison's characters and their situations. In a majority of these stories, however, implied details give readers the sense that Robison's characters deserve respect and admiration.

Birdie, for example, in "Trying" (*Believe Them*) is a high-school student whose parents appear to over-exercise their civic responsibility to the point of neglecting their daughter's need. As a result, she impresses teachers by wearing a T-shirt with the Bill of Rights printed on it (which, she explains is not her idea), writes graffiti on the topic of nuclear disarmament on the bathroom walls and, as a release, becomes the class clown. She appears to be so bombarded with attempts at saving the world that, at the end of the story, she refuses to join a civics club, laughs hysterically and is horrified when a comic nun reaches out to show her some genuine affection. She is unable to return the affection and this, she tells a friend, is one thing she very much regrets. Readers may have little doubt, however, that she will eventually find the strength to show affection.

According to Dean Flower, Robison's characters are part of an age of happy problems, an age a "Guide to the Night" is not necessary (307). Like those of Barthelme and most other writers as Richard Ford and Raymond Carver who are considered to be minimalists, these characters belong to a generation that has not endured war, persecution or a major economic depression. Their emotional trials are getting through their daily lives without becoming victims of their circumstances.

Of these characters' rather protected lives, however, readers get glimpses of their most painful moments. Robison shows us the details of an instant. While readers miss the beginning they can usually figure out what is going on. During the

middle, readers see what is crucial, a tense moment in which characters must deal with such obstacles as mental illness, alcoholism, unplanned pregnancy and death. The end of Robison's stories, like those of most minimalists, lack closure, but the readers have seen enough to imagine how the stories might end. Miriam M. Clark illustrates that "Robison's stories end without respect to episode but rather, it appears, as soon as they have exhausted a brief, barely won moment of narrative coherence" (online: 13).

Another example of the minimalism of plot is found in "The Nature of Almost Everything" (*An Amateur's Guide to the Night*). The plot revolves around a young alcoholic woman's battle to stay sober after a stressful argument with her boss. "Tell you, at thirty-six, my goals are to stay sober and pay off my Master Card bill" (100), the narrator begins the story. After driving off to compose herself, she examines her life and decides that it is bleak. Then, she sees things more optimistically when she realizes that she is strong enough to make it without a drink.

The body of Robison's work dismisses the critical fallacy that minimalism necessarily means incapacity. It dismisses, as well, the critical accusation that minimalist material is dreary; while Robison's stories deal with serious topics, they deal with them very compassionately and give readers the impression that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Robison is able to create a world in which people, despite their weakness and quirks, can find ways to deal with their problems and go on with their lives.

The futile debate over whether or not less is more has gone on for centuries and will most likely continue for centuries to come. I describe the debate as futile because, as the short stories of Carver and Robison illustrate, works must be judged individually. The differences between writers--as well as the differences between

individual stories by one writer—suggest that a more appropriate literary philosophy is that less can be more.

Placing very different writers and the different works of a single writer under the common label of minimalism, then, is not productive. Carver seems to have been right in wanting to be called simply a writer; the minimalist label makes the scope of his work seem much narrower than it is. Robison seems to be correct in her indifference towards the term as well; by not restricting herself to writing only one kind of story, she is able to better explore the possibilities of short fiction.

Based on the study of these writers, "minimalism" will be more short-lived for two reasons. First, because writers need the freedom to experiment, very few writers will have a desire to create strictly minimalist works. As the later, longer works of writers from Hemingway to Robison illustrate that minimalist stories can be challenging to write, but they are not consistently memorable and they can eventually become limiting. Second, stories are, in the long run, judged, on their individual merits. Already unique stories by authors who have been labeled minimalists are starting to appear in anthologies without this label accompanying them. Contrary to the belief of many critics, their appearance in such collections indicates that writers labeled minimalists can create first-rate stories that produce a variety of intriguing effects. It is such effects that make stories memorable and give them a unique place in literary history rather than merely a place in a school of short fiction. Without the former, the latter eventually becomes unimportant. Some stories condemned as minimalist are likely to live on for generations to come.

Because many minimalist stories have been judged to be good enough to be placed side by side with the established masters of the form on their individual merits, the question of why critics so vehemently attack stories they consider to be minimalist is perplexing. This study illustrates that two forces create this reasoning.

First, there are many writers who use extreme brevity but fail to create an extreme-effect. These writers do little more imitate what they see without grasping the idea that no matter how one uses the form, something memorable must be created or the story will not be successful. Second, and most important, is that critics seem to be reacting against the extremeness of minimalist writing. This may be disturbing not only because writers traditionally used what are now considered to be minimalist techniques in moderation, but also because television has conditioned us to expect a simple, clear-cut type of drama. People can find anything they desire on television, including undeniably admirable characters and structured plots that present a moral lesson in half an hour. Finding something different –something equally as short yet more challenging, more compelling and snoring memorable than a sitcom—then, might tend to be a bit unsettling. Yet despite criticism, writers adapt and compete. Moreover, as the current short story renaissance, of which minimalist writing is a big part, suggests, perhaps they are winning over a few people who might otherwise be tempted to turn on their television sets.

The term minimalism, then, may not be obsolete in referring to a specific type of work that has been designed to call attention to itself through extreme brevity and singleness of effect. Because it pushes these traditional ideas to their extremes, minimalism is characterized by the unique qualities of limited length and limitless implications. Intellectual word games that take the form simple narratives, minimalist short stories, at their best, are intellectually challenging and emotionally stirring.

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