

Carver Across the Curriculum

Carver Across the Curriculum:
Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching
the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver

Edited by

Paul Benedict Grant and Katherine Ashley

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

PAUL BENEDICT GRANT
AND KATHERINE ASHLEY

Teaching Raymond Carver, for me, has meant calling upon a great storyteller in order to bestir both my students and myself: that we look inward and outward, both; that we try to extend the range of our social vision, but also, our moral empathy; that we try to understand how pitiable any of us can be, how isolated and lonely...but that we also remember those daily, unheralded breakthroughs which, finally, give us human beings what dignity we can achieve, as in those closing moments of ‘Cathedral,’ moments worth textbooks of psychology and philosophy. Teaching Raymond Carver has meant, I now realize, learning about how to teach, and yes, how to be; we all, so often, as in ‘Cathedral,’ are the blind leading the blind, yet we can and do enable sight, even elicit the visionary in one another—our only hope, one another. Teaching Raymond Carver has meant glimpsing lots of flaws in myself, yet feeling stronger for partaking of the wonderful feast this exceptionally talented twentieth-century writer has left us: a large and great thing, his books, their astonishing, compelling wisdom as it slowly, modestly unfolds, nourishes and sustains and inspires us fragile, thirsty, hungry, ever so needy readers.¹

Rousing words from Robert Coles—and yet, from the point of view of provocation, they do not seem to have caused a sufficient stir. It is indeed surprising that the impact that the fiction and poetry of Raymond Carver had on Coles, and which inspired his students in turn—students in classes across the curriculum, from medical students at Harvard and Dartmouth, to psychiatric and pediatric residents, students of Documentary Studies at Duke University, to those studying the links between literature and painting—has not bestirred more teachers to adopt similarly innovative approaches and extend their range of vision in order to “elicit the visionary” in their students. If, as Coles claims, teaching Raymond Carver means learning how to teach, we could perhaps do with a few more lesson plans.

¹ Robert Coles, “American Light,” 223-24.

The idea for this book grew out of our experiences of teaching Carver's short stories in Canadian universities. We have taught his fiction for many years now, at the first- and second-year level, and we always look forward to it, not only because he is one of our favorite authors, but because his stories invariably appeal to students. In introductory courses that include short fiction by the likes of John Updike, Flannery O'Connor, and Shirley Jackson, it is Carver's stories that habitually strike an empathetic chord. In this respect (as in many others), our experience has been similar to that of Coles:

Carver is more on the minds of many of these young men and women than the other writers: he touches them, gives them pause, stays with them in a powerful way.²

The reasons for this are various. Carver's subject matter is something that students say they can "relate" to (though this is somewhat disconcerting, given the fact that his fiction is full of dysfunctional relationships, substance abuse, and violence); his language, though far subtler than it seems, is accessible (no difficult vocabulary); the bleak, disaffected vision that his work appears to embody also attracts students, many of whom, as "typical" teenagers, tend to have one. Regardless of the reason, it is a pleasure to teach Carver's works because the enthusiasm of the class is usually greater.

Many university instructors have experienced similar reactions when teaching Carver's work, so it struck us as strange that there were so few teaching resources available. On investigation, we discovered that, despite the fact that his short stories appear regularly in most of the major literary anthologies (e.g., Broadview, Heath, Longman, Nelson, Norton), there is a lack of instructional aids to teaching his work at university level.³ This collection of essays will, we hope, help fill this gap. Drawing on the experiences of instructors who have taught Carver's fiction and poetry at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level, it is designed to serve as a guide to those who are currently engaged in teaching his works, and as a

² *Ibid.*, 218.

³ With the exception of notes and lesson plans in workbooks that accompany some of the anthologies, as well as online teaching aids (e.g., the webpage of Paul Jones, contributing editor for the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*), there are no guides to teaching Carver's work at university level. Susanne Rubenstein's *Raymond Carver in the Classroom: A Small, Good Thing* is aimed at high school teachers; consequently, most of the suggested methods of teaching Carver's work are unsuitable for university students.

source of inspiration for those who are considering introducing Carver into their courses.

The remit for contributors was straightforward. Because the book was designed as a guide for university instructors, the emphasis was placed on pedagogy. Essays were sought that focused on what actually takes place in the university classroom, the challenges that professors face in teaching Carver's work, and the successes that they have achieved when adopting a particular approach. In short, we were not looking for essays that simply offered readings of Carver's fiction and poetry (though, of course, a certain amount of analysis was inevitable), but that presented productive and innovative ways of teaching it. The innovation lay in the interdisciplinary approach.

With respect to the interdisciplinary aspect of the book: we have no theoretical axe to grind, no new theory to propose nor old one to uphold; we simply believe that if there are ways in which Carver's work can be better understood and appreciated, then teachers should use any means at their disposal to further that understanding and appreciation. For Coles's students, "Carver's stories enabled a leap out of one world, into another"⁴; we hope that the essays in this volume will inspire teachers to make that leap in relation to the disciplines. Some of the essays discuss teaching Carver in disciplines other than English literature, such as Modern Languages and the Medical Humanities; others bring disciplines such as Humor Studies, Film Studies, and Food Studies into the literature classroom. Approaching Carver's texts through mediums such as music, medicine, film, or photography does not devalue or displace the written word; on the contrary, it shows how his words resonate beyond the printed page to enrich other areas of life.

Given the nature of this book, it seemed appropriate to devote Part I to an overview of Carver's own experiences as a student and a teacher. It is a story of academic underachievement, inspirational teachers, alcoholism, determination, and survival. Carver committed a number of crimes against teaching during his so-called "Bad Raymond" days, but these are countered, and perhaps mitigated, by the testimonies of students to whom he became a mentor, much as his own writing teachers, John Gardner and Richard Day, had been to him. Carver was not an innovative teacher (indeed, one wonders what he would have made of this book), but his lack of originality is balanced by his humane approach to the art of teaching and his constant, across-the-board encouragement. In reading of his days as a student, and the rise and fall and rise of his teaching career, one must

⁴ Coles, "American Light," 219.

also not forget “the student’s (first) wife”—Maryann Burk Carver—who sacrificed aspects of her own education (and, at one point, a permanent teaching job in Los Altos High School) so that her husband could receive the education and support (both financial and spiritual) that he needed.⁵

Part II presents ten approaches to teaching Carver’s work. This work has become so iconic that it has given rise to the term “Carver Country,” which is both a state of mind and a geographical locale. The first chapter situates Carver in his own country, the Pacific Northwest, and focuses on how the region’s dying economy of extraction manifests itself in both song and story. In her classes on “So Much Water So Close to Home” and “After the Denim,” Angela Sorby analyzes thematic connections between Carver and Pacific Northwest folk and grunge music, and focuses on the changing conceptions of masculinity and male violence that they expose. These themes resurface in Robert P. Waxler’s chapter, where he discusses his experiences teaching Carver’s work not only to undergraduates, but to criminal offenders in his innovative Changing Lives Through Literature program. Waxler’s classes on “Tell the Women We’re Going” and “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” explore the ways in which male violence is often a consequence of inarticulacy and rigid gender roles. Yet, by emphasizing the connection between love, language, and violence, Waxler’s students discover that Carver’s stories ultimately allow for a redemptive, emotional vulnerability that transcends gender.

Just as Carver’s work offers opportunities for social and emotional rehabilitation, it also has a role to play in the medical classroom. As Coles has discussed in his classes on Carver in the field of Medical Humanities, the inarticulacy that plagues Carver’s characters is sometimes found in those who work in the medical profession:

Doctors, especially, in their work, struggle to make themselves clear—and so often, fail miserably, out of their own fear and anxiety, out of callousness, out of simple human error, out of the limitations imposed by their inevitably flawed humanity. Still, we ought [to] keep trying to reach out, to connect with those others who get called patients in such a way that we have a good idea what we intend to convey, and then offer our words in a manner that enables the person addressed to get our intended message.⁶

This relationship between communication and compassion lies at the heart of Johanna Shapiro and Audrey Shafer’s chapter, “‘It Doesn’t Look Good’:

⁵ See Maryann Burk Carver, *What It Used to be Like: A Portrait of My Marriage to Raymond Carver*.

⁶ Coles, “American Light,” 221-22.

Teaching End of Life Care through Carver's Poetry." They show how, in a medical education setting, the poems that deal with doctors, patients, illness, and death can be used to teach student-physicians to cope with their own emotional responses to death, and with their patients, when "curing" is no longer a possibility. Shapiro's and Shafer's classes on "What the Doctor Said," "Proposal," "My Death," and "Late Fragment" demonstrate how literary analysis can influence clinical behavior. They illuminate the links between medicine and Carver's poetry—and since end of life issues affect us all, these are lessons that can be taught in any classroom.

Death and dying are serious subjects, but they need not always be treated as such. Indeed, Shapiro and Shafer make a point of highlighting the importance of the "mordant humor" of Carver's end of life poems. Paul Benedict Grant's chapter extends this subject, as he shares his experiences of teaching Carver's fiction and poetry in the context of a humor course. Grant takes his cue from Carver's own assessment of his humor being "black," and discusses teaching "Whoever Was Using This Bed" in relation to the genre of black humor, and Freud's theory of gallows humor in particular. By focusing on an undervalued aspect of Carver's writing, he seeks to give his students a fresh perspective on a writer whom they may have mistakenly pigeonholed.

As Grant states in his essay, humor is a crucial form of communication, bringing people from different backgrounds together, easing tensions, and providing channels for emotional commerce when other avenues become blocked; but it can also erect barriers between people. Jeff Birkenstein believes that food and all of its related social rituals can have the same effect, and in his chapter he describes how he and his students discover that food is a source of both pleasure and conflict in Carver's work. By reading Carver through the lens of what he calls "Significant Food"—food that functions as a narrative device, with its own attendant grammar—Birkenstein sheds new light on stories like "A Small, Good Thing," "Errand," "Fat," and "Cathedral." His classes demonstrate that while the act of breaking bread is associated with the notion of communion, food does not always immediately function in this way in Carver's fiction.

At its best, teaching, learning, and reading can be transformative. In keeping with this idea, several essays in this collection focus on creative transformations of Carver's work—translation, adaptation, imitation—whether students are encouraged to transform the texts themselves through "deformance," or whether they study pre-existing transformations like film adaptations. Katherine Ashley's and Sandra Lee Kleppe's chapters are both based on teaching Carver in a second language context, but the

insights and analyses they contain are relevant to all classrooms. Ashley extends the borders of “Carver Country” by using Carver’s stories in a Modern Languages classroom as a means of teaching literary translation. In her discussion of “Popular Mechanics” and “Poseidon and Company,” she discusses the advantages of using Carver’s “short” short stories—their length allows for whole-text translation and their style lends itself to discussions of the differences between literary and non-literary language—and how those stories can be used to introduce students to the notions of intertextuality and comparative literature. Kleppe takes the concepts of “performance” and “deformance” as starting points, and discusses how visual and interactive exercises encourage a more creative approach to reading Carver’s work. By focusing on poems like “Winter Insomnia” and “What the Doctor Said,” Kleppe shows that performing, rewriting, drawing, or otherwise altering the text can bring students closer to an understanding of Carver’s art and idiom. At the postgraduate level, film adaptation and editing can be studied as part of the deformance process, too, and this not only helps students in their analyses of Carver, but schools them in the types of skills they will need in their own academic careers.

Zhenya Kiperman’s chapter extends Kleppe’s discussion of film adaptation by describing the process by which he teaches Carver’s stories in conjunction with Robert Altman’s movie, *Short Cuts*. In his Film Studies courses, Kiperman presents Carver and Altman as sharing an artistic sensibility characterized by a stylistic reserve that makes art of the everyday and accentuates the random nature of (bad) luck. This shared aesthetic enables Kiperman to use his classes on “A Small, Good Thing” and “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” to examine the generic differences between literature and film, to discuss the use of voiceover and flashback, and to use Carver’s dialogues as models in screenwriting exercises. The emphasis on the visual is retained in the next chapter by Ayala Amir, “Teaching Carver through the Eye of the Camera,” which situates Carver’s fiction in relation to photography and, secondarily, painting. Using “Viewfinder” as a springboard, Amir presents photography as a metaphor for Carver’s fiction: the use of visual detail in Carver’s stories lends itself to class discussions of the boundaries and limitations of realism in photography and literature and the temporal / spatial elements of writing.

Bringing the volume to a close is Robert Miltner’s “Imitating Carver in the Creative Writing Classroom.” Miltner begins by reminding us (as Carver often did) that in the visual and performing arts, imitation of acknowledged masters is a tried and tested means of teaching students

their craft. He suggests that just as Carver imitated the techniques of other authors when honing his skills—most notably, Hemingway and Chekhov—so aspiring writers can imitate Carver. This approach not only demonstrates Carver’s versatility in poetic and prose forms, but allows students to develop their own style through imitation. To this end, Miltner presents a variety of ways in which Carver’s poetry and prose can be used to teach creative writing at all levels.

As the title of this book suggests, by bringing together this chorus of voices from different disciplines, we hope to encourage university teachers to embrace the variety of methodologies on offer, a variety which reflects the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of many modern university courses. We hope that prospective teachers of Carver’s work will benefit from the approaches presented in this book, and will be inspired to try original approaches of their own.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AoU Carver, Raymond. *All of Us: The Collected Poems*. Edited by William L. Stull. New York: Knopf, 1998.

CS Carver, Raymond. *Collected Stories*. Edited by William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll. New York: Library of America, 2009.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

RAYMOND CARVER: STUDENT, TEACHER, MENTOR

PAUL BENEDICT GRANT

I'd be happy if they simply put 'poet' on my tombstone. 'Poet'—and in parentheses, 'and short story writer.' (*laughs*)...

And 'teacher.'

And 'teacher,' yes. (*laughs*) Teacher would be at the bottom.¹

Teaching doesn't inspire me. I'm not getting ideas from my teaching or ideas from my students. But it pays the rent and provides me with a good living.²

I received this grant from the Academy of Arts and Letters. It's a tax-free annual income for 5 years, and it's renewable at the end of that time. The only stipulation is that I do not have any other form of employment...So I resigned my job the day I got this news. I finished the semester and said I wouldn't be coming back. I no longer teach but I don't miss it. I think I did a good job when I was teaching and I don't miss it at all. In fact I wonder how I got anything else done while I was teaching.³

It may seem paradoxical to begin a book on approaches to teaching the fiction and poetry of Raymond Carver with quotations from Carver himself commenting on how much he disliked teaching and how keen he was to leave the profession. If candor is a virtue (and Carver certainly thought so), it can sometimes be self-defeating. That said, there are surely few university teachers who would not resign from their posts if given the kind of opportunity that presented itself to Carver in 1983 with the Mildred and Harold Strauss Livings Award. This is no reflection on their dedication or their ability to inspire their students; it is merely that, like

¹ Schumacher, "After the Fire, into the Fire," 219.

² Pope and McElhinny, "Raymond Carver Speaking," 12.

³ Sexton, "David Sexton Talks to Raymond Carver," 128.

Carver, many teachers find that the pressures of the job leave them little time to devote to their personal projects.⁴ For some, no doubt, teaching is what it ideally should be: a vocation; for the majority, however, it is a more practical enterprise, a means of paying the rent, a natural progression of the route they have followed since graduating and achieving the required credentials. Carver's credentials lay in his renown as a creative writer, and he assumed the role of teacher reluctantly. As a consequence, his attitude towards teaching—his assessment of his abilities as a teacher, the enjoyment he derived from it, and his commitment to the profession—was ambivalent. Novelist Jay McInerney, who was one of Carver's students at Syracuse University (Carver's last teaching job, and the one that the Strauss award enabled him to leave), gives an accurate description of Carver's position:

[H]e was an unlikely teacher...It was something he did out of necessity, a role he was uncomfortable with. He did it to make a living, because it was easier than the other jobs he'd had—working at a sawmill and a hospital, working as a service station attendant, a janitor, a delivery boy, a textbook editor. Though grateful for genteel employment, he didn't really see why people who had a gift for writing should necessarily be able to teach.⁵

Often, ironically, the role one assumes with reluctance—even actively opposes—is the role for which one is specially gifted. This seems to have been the case with Carver. Despite his discomfort, he genuinely inspired students like McInerney, who ends his memoir by expressing the enormity of the debt that he owes his old teacher:

For someone who claimed he didn't love to teach, he made a great deal of difference to a great many students. He certainly changed my life irrevocably and I have heard others say the same thing.⁶

These others include fellow Syracuse student and author C.J. Hribal, as well as students such as Martha Gies and D. G. Myers, whose combined

⁴ It should be noted that while Carver complained to Sexton that teaching left him no time to write, in an interview with Kasia Boddy he stated the opposite: "I had more time for my own work than I did with any other kinds of job I'd had" (Boddy, "A Conversation," 202).

⁵ McInerney, "Raymond Carver, Mentor," 119, 121.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

sentiments are summed up succinctly in the title of McInerney's essay: "Raymond Carver, Mentor."⁷

The concept of mentorship was one that Carver was familiar and comfortable with, because two of his own teachers—John Gardner and Richard Cortez Day—had fulfilled that role for him when he was a student. The teachers who mattered most to Carver were those who were willing to enter into such a relationship—what Carver repeatedly referred to in interviews as "the maestro-apprentice relationship"⁸—and the students to whom Carver mattered most were those who had this kind of relationship with him. It is fair to say that success for the students involved in such relationships is ultimately more a matter of personal growth than grades; certainly, this was the case with Carver, who did not excel academically.

In both elementary and high school, Carver was judged a mediocre and (from the point of view of behavior) problematic pupil, pulling poor grades for the most part, absenting himself from class on a regular basis, arguing with his classmates, and becoming progressively more disenchanting with school as he moved into his teens. He graduated from Yakima Senior High School (now Davis High School) in June 1956 with an average grade of C-, 337 out of a class of 441.⁹ It was an unenviable ranking, but one suspects that this mattered less to him than the fact that he was the first member of his family to earn a high school diploma. It is worth noting, however, that Carver remained acutely aware of the importance of educational credentials throughout his life, and may have

⁷ McInerney's essay appears under this title in *Remembering Ray*; it originally appeared as "Raymond Carver: A Still, Small Voice," in *The New York Times Book Review*, 6 August 1989. For further testimonies on Carver's impact as a teacher, see Gies, "Teacher: A Memoir of Raymond Carver," and Myers, "Between Stories: A Memoir of Raymond Carver." Gies studied with Carver at summer workshops at Centrum, Port Townsend, Washington State in 1980 and 1982. She met him again after he had retired from teaching, and her response to his comments on his old career defines the concept of mentorship: "I asked him, wistfully, if he missed the teaching and he said, 'Not really. No.' 'Well, you may not be my teacher any longer,' I said, 'but I'm still your student.'" Japanese author Haruki Murakami felt the same way, though he did not study with Carver: "Until I encountered [the works of] Raymond Carver, there had never been a person I could, as an author, call my mentor....Through reading books...I learned to recognize what constitutes great fiction. And, in this sense, Raymond Carver was without question the most valuable teacher I had" (Murakami, "A Literary Comrade," 132).

⁸ See, for example, Schumacher, "After the Fire, into the Fire," 220.

⁹ Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 42.

harbored deep-rooted insecurities about being “below average” and academically underqualified. This is suggested by the fact that he doctored his Curriculum Vitae on more than one occasion so as to assign himself postgraduate status and non-existent degrees: in the mid-1960s, he referred to himself in print as being a doctoral student at Sacramento State College when he was not actually enrolled; and for his (successful) tenure review at Syracuse in 1982, he granted himself an MFA from the University of Iowa when he had, in fact, dropped out of the program.¹⁰

During his tenth grade in Yakima Senior High, Carver enrolled in a correspondence course in Creative Writing offered by the Palmer Institute of Authorship. He took it seriously (more seriously than he did his schoolwork, it seems), sending his first creative efforts to magazines; thus, we might say that his literary apprenticeship began here. It continued in earnest when he enrolled in Chico State College, California, in 1958. Carver had attended Yakima Valley Community College in 1957, taking classes in European History, Philosophy, and Sociology, but not until Chico did he find the direction he needed. His first publication—a letter to the editor—appeared in the Chico State student newspaper, *The Wildcat*, on 31 October 1958. Far more important, however, was meeting the teacher who was to have such an indelible effect on his work: John Gardner.

This meeting took place in 1959, when Carver was twenty years old. Twenty-four years later, in an essay entitled “John Gardner: The Writer as Teacher,” Carver expressed his debt to Gardner, and in numerous interviews he never missed a chance to voice his gratitude for what Gardner had done for him. By his own admission, Carver arrived at Chico a naïf, and at the beginning of his essay he recalls his lack of, and desire for, an education:

I felt in my bones I had to get some education in order to go along with being a writer. I put a very high premium on education then—much higher in those days than now, I’m sure, but that’s because I’m older and have an education. Understand that nobody in my family had ever gone to college or for that matter had got beyond the mandatory eighth grade in high school. I didn’t *know anything*, but I knew I didn’t know anything.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., 124, 398.

¹¹ Carver, “John Gardner,” xi-xii. Carver’s essay was originally published in 1983, a year after Gardner’s death, in the *Georgia Review*; it appeared that same year in Carver’s collection, *Fires*, and as a Foreword to Gardner’s *On Becoming a Novelist*.

In Gardner's Creative Writing 101, Carver began that education, learning "what is necessary to become a writer and stay a writer."¹² The personal attention he received from Gardner was crucial:

he took my stories more seriously, read them closer and more carefully, than I had any right to expect...It was close, line-by-line criticism he was giving me...and it was invaluable to me in my development as a writer.¹³

Aware of Carver's personal circumstances (he was married with two young children, who were a permanent source of distraction), Gardner even lent Carver the keys to his office so that he could work undisturbed, a token of trust that Carver called "a turning point" in his life.¹⁴ Ensnared there on weekends, Carver undertook his "first serious attempts at writing."¹⁵

In 1960, two years into his Bachelor's degree at Chico, Carver switched to Humboldt State College in Arcata, California, where he was to meet another teacher who was to become a friend and mentor: Richard Day. Like Gardner, Day had attended the University of Iowa's writing program, and although his approach to teaching differed from Gardner's, his influence on Carver was just as strong—particularly with respect to subject matter. Day encouraged Carver to write about people and events he was familiar with: "I suggested he write stories a little closer to home. And he did."¹⁶ The focal shift paid off: in 1961, while at Humboldt, Carver published his first short story, "The Furious Seasons," in Chico State's *Selection*; in 1961, a second story, "The Father," appeared in the Humboldt student magazine *Toyon*. More significantly, that same year he broke into non-student publications, with a poem appearing in the journal *Targets*, and a short story, "Pastoral," accepted for *Western Humanities Review* (published in 1963).

Carver completed his Bachelor of Arts degree at Humboldt in 1963, but his days as a student were not over. His transcript was weak, but on the strength of his creative writing samples and a strong recommendation from Day, he was accepted, like Gardner and Day before him, into the Iowa Writers' Workshop, receiving a \$1,000 fellowship. Carver enrolled in the two-year MFA program and studied under Donald Justice, R.V. Cassill, and Bryan McMahon, among others. It was an ideal opportunity

¹² *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁶ Interview with Dick Day, in Halpert, *Raymond Carver*, 2.

for him to launch a career as a writer, but he had financial worries, and though productive, he was generally unhappy with the Workshop's intensive and often insensitive approach to teaching. As Justice recalls, "he was dissatisfied and restless. He felt the workshop atmosphere was wrong for him, and it probably was."¹⁷ In June 1964, with only 12 of the 60 required credits for the MFA, and despite the promise of a stipend which would have enabled him to stay for a further year, Carver left the program to return to California without a degree.

That same summer, Carver landed a teaching post in a high school in Willows, California, but after signing the contract he became extremely nervous at the prospect of teaching and reneged at the eleventh hour. Seven years would pass before he entered the profession. These were difficult years defined by a sense of aimlessness and financial hardship, full of plans and promises made and broken, during which Carver's drinking began to be a problem. By the time he was hired by James B. Hall for his first teaching post at the University of California Santa Cruz in 1971—as a visiting lecturer in Creative Writing, teaching poetry one day per week—Carver was on the way to becoming an alcoholic.

In an interview conducted in July 1977, a month after he quit drinking for good, Carver told Cassandra Phillips: "It was a terrifying prospect to be a teacher, but I wound up doing a good job."¹⁸ Morton Marcus, who asked Carver to teach a weekend class on his own writing in Palo Alto immediately prior to his taking up his post at Santa Cruz, reveals exactly *how* terrifying Carver found the prospect:

When I met Ray [to accompany him to class] I was surprised by how nervous he was. He was more jumpy than I had ever seen him. I pretended not to notice at first, but as he tremblingly lit one cigarette after another I finally asked what was wrong.

'This is the first time,' he said.

'For what?' I replied.

'This is the first time I ever taught a class.'

'On your own work?'

'On anything.'

It had never occurred to me that Ray hadn't taught before. I tried to calm him down, give him confidence and a few basic pointers—a coach's pep talk...I don't think that set him at ease at all.

He was dry-mouthed and twitching as he began the class. But...the outright admiration of the entire group was so apparent that within fifteen minutes my rhetorical questions and other verbal aids were no longer

¹⁷ Interview with Donald Justice, in Halpert, *Raymond Carver*, 7.

¹⁸ Phillips, "Accolade-Winning Author Returns to Humboldt," 6.

necessary. Ray's shy, humble manner won everyone over...I like to think he developed his unassuming, open classroom style because of what happened that day, but the truth is he was just being Ray and sooner or later he would have realized that simple secret of teaching.¹⁹

As McInerney notes of Carver's teaching at Syracuse a decade later, Carver never entirely lost his fear of being in front of a class, but he also retained that "simple secret":

[H]e was very shy. The idea of facing a class made him nervous every time. On the days he had to teach he would get agitated, as if he himself were a student on the day of the final exam...but he would read his favorite passages, talk about what he loved in the book he had chosen...eventually there would come a moment when the nervousness would lift off him as he spoke about writing that moved him.²⁰

Carver expanded on this point in his interview with Michael Schumacher:

[M]y teaching career was unique for several reasons, one reason being the fact that never, in my wildest imaginings, could I have seen myself as a teacher. I was always the shyest kid in class—*any* class. I never said anything. So the idea of conducting a class or having anything to say or being able to help students was the furthest thing away from my mind. Coming, as I did, from a family where nobody had gone past sixth grade, the idea of being around the university in such a capacity, as a teacher, was important, I suppose, to my self-esteem.²¹

Shyness and self-esteem aside, did Carver "wind up doing a good job," as he claimed? Santa Cruz student Kenneth Inadomi believes so:

He had distinctive yet classic teacher's instincts. He was intense, sensitive, inquisitive, patient, encouraging—all packaged with understatement.²²

D.G. Myers, another of Carver's students at Santa Cruz, was initially unimpressed:

¹⁹ Marcus, "All-American Nightmares," 61.

²⁰ McInerney, "Raymond Carver, Mentor," 121-22.

²¹ Schumacher, "After the Fire, into the Fire," 219. Interestingly, this statement contradicts what Carver had stated in his essay on John Gardner four years earlier, where he claimed that no one in his family had gotten beyond eighth grade; he seems to be exaggerating his achievement here.

²² Inadomi, "Read It Again," 127.

As a classroom teacher, Ray was nothing special. He subscribed to the twin ideas of creative writing pedagogy: student work, mimeographed and handed around in advance, provided the text for study and discussion; and in the name of establishing a ‘community of writers’ which offered its members ‘communal criticism,’ students dominated the discussions. Ray said little. Occasionally he called upon a student to speak. He saw himself as merely the senior member of the class.²³

Myers’s comments suggest that he was disenchanted with Carver, but the opposite is true:

Of all my writing teachers, Raymond Carver’s influence has been the most profound and the hardest to define....Ray was the man who taught me how to write, because he did not instruct me in the techniques of fiction—the tricks of the trade—but rather embodied the practice of writing in his own life.²⁴

These comments highlight Carver’s strengths as a teacher, which lay not in originality of approach, but in his ability to forge meaningful relationships with his students. These relationships were not (solely) dependent on learning the techniques involved in creative writing, but rested on less concrete, more abstract concepts such as a writer’s values and attitudes towards his or her craft. Marcus emphasizes these more “humanistic” aspects of Carver’s contribution:

While he was at [Santa Cruz], Ray influenced a lot of students, including a number of my former pupils who would tell me how much they loved him as both a teacher and a human being.²⁵

Santa Cruz was the first of many teaching posts that Carver held; as his profile in literary circles grew, he secured other appointments which enabled him to earn a sporadic income. Over the next twelve years, until his retirement from Syracuse in 1983, he taught at (among other institutions) the University of California, Berkeley, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, the University of California, Santa Barbara, Goddard College in Vermont, the University of Texas, El Paso, and Yaddo. In addition, while teaching at Santa Cruz, he was awarded a Wallace E. Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University. On paper, the situation seems healthy, but Carver’s first appointment at Santa Cruz coincided with a marked

²³ Myers, “Between Stories.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Marcus, “All-American Nightmares,” 62.

increase in his drinking. Indeed, Carver's first wife, Maryann, believes that his alcohol intake increased as a direct result of his job:

[H]is drinking habits changed when he started to teach. He was very shy...To be up in front of a class or group of people was terrifying for him. It was against his nature, though he became very good at it...I had cooked up this teaching job for him through friends who knew James B. Hall...Ray was flattered to get the job, but he would drink the moment he got out of class. He'd have several drinks, and his whole drinking pattern changed. He drank around his job, although he did an excellent job there.²⁶

Carver's heavy drinking naturally had a negative impact on his teaching, and there are consequently many examples of his irresponsibility as a teacher during this period. From 1972-1974, for example, he held "multiple academic positions simultaneously without informing his employers about his obligations to the others."²⁷ At one point, in order to pick up two paychecks, Carver flew between UCSC and Iowa every week, and this constant commuting earned him the nickname "Running Dog." In Iowa, Carver and John Cheever drank their way through the fall semester of 1973:

When we were teaching...he and I did nothing *but* drink. I mean we met our classes, in a manner of speaking. But the entire time we were there...I don't think either of us ever took the covers off our typewriters.²⁸

There are also the times when, too drunk or hungover to teach at UCSC, Carver would have his writer-friends and fellow drinkers William Kittredge and Chuck Kinder step in to teach for him, or cancel his classes, posting (or having his cohorts post) a curt sign on his office door: "Can't teach. Sick."²⁹ Things reached a head in 1974 when alcoholism forced him to resign from UC Santa Barbara.

As Carver would be the first to admit, nothing redeems this kind of behavior: he was short-changing his students and his employers. After he quit drinking, regaining his reputation was difficult: "I had to learn to teach sober."³⁰ He did, and his slow recuperation began in 1978 when,

²⁶ Interview with Maryann Carver, in Halpert, *Raymond Carver*, 74.

²⁷ Stull, "Chronology," *CS*, 967.

²⁸ Simpson and Buzbee, "Raymond Carver," 40. Absurdly, when Cheever later recommended Carver for a residency at Yaddo, he called him "an industrious teacher" (Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 294).

²⁹ Kittredge, "Bulletproof," 89.

³⁰ Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 341.

with friends and writers Richard Ford and Michael Ryan vouching for his dependability, he was hired to teach a two-week residency in the Creative Writing program of Goddard College. As Ford recalls,

We vouched on no surety except that we liked Ray and liked his stories, and that Ray would come to Goddard and teach and would not get drunk and disappear. Which indeed he didn't do. He came to Goddard and was a wonderful teacher and it all worked out fine.³¹

A job at the University of Texas, El Paso, soon followed. Carver, however, was still unsure of himself, as Ford explains:

I was in touch with him a lot, particularly in the first semester in El Paso. I remember very vividly talking him out of quitting his job at midyear. I remember him saying that he didn't like it there, and he didn't want to stay...I just kept saying to him, look, don't quit this job. With this job, you can go on and get another better job. So don't quit it, because it will go hard for you if you don't stay in El Paso and you want to go someplace better. Indeed, by that time he was trying to get a job at Syracuse. George Elliot, who taught at Syracuse, loved Ray's work but was a little skittish of Ray because of his drinking past.³²

Ford persuaded Carver to persevere, and in January 1980 Carver began his final, full-time teaching post at Syracuse University, replacing Elliot when the latter retired. When Carver received tenure at Syracuse two years later, the review committee stated in their recommendation that “students are impressed—in some cases transformed—by the integrity of his dedication to the craft of fiction.”³³

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Carver's approach to teaching did not change in its essentials. He adopted the methods of his mentors, Gardner and Day (and also poet and teacher Dennis Schmitz, whom he had met while auditing a class at Sacramento State College):

I tried to teach a writers [*sic*] workshop class the way they did. I tried to give people a lot of personal attention and help them to the best of my ability.³⁴

In his essay on Gardner, Carver states that one of the former's central tenets was “that certain aspects of writing can be taught and handed over to

³¹ Interview with Richard Ford, in Halpert, *Raymond Carver*, 98-99.

³² *Ibid.*, 100-101.

³³ Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 398.

³⁴ Schumacher, “After the Fire, into the Fire,” 220.