Talking About Love Essay, Research Paper

Talking about love.

What is love? It may seem like a stupid question, but on second examination, it doesn t seem quite so stupid. After all, love is a feeling. How can we really describe what a feeling is or means? The meaning of any feeling can differ greatly between individuals, and the meaning of love is no different. In What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, Raymond Carver weaves a tale of two couples examining what love is. While Carver doesn t reveal any great truths about what love is, he does make a statement about the nature of true love. Carver makes the point that modern, on-again, off-again relationships have little to do with love. True love is about needing someone so badly that it s unbearable to think of life without that person. There is a fine line between true love and obsession; the former being one of the most wonderful feelings that humans can experience, and the latter many times ending in tragedy. Carver makes these points in the story through his use of subplot, imagery, and symbolism.

The most obvious technique Carver uses in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love to make his point is through the subplots in the story. The subplots revolve around the two main couples in the story, and another couple that is introduced by one of the characters near the end of the story. The first couple, Mel and Terri, had been in very bad relationships before meeting one another. They have been together for five years, and married for four. Mel s marriage to his ex-wife Marjorie apparently ended on a very bad note. Carver states near the end of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, She s allergic to bees, Mel said. If I m not praying she ll get married again, I m praying she ll get herself stung to death by a swarm of fucking bees (444). Clearly whatever love Mel once felt for his ex-wife has evaporated. Terri also suffered through a bad relationship at the hands of an abusive man named Ed. Terri and Mel argue over Terri s belief that Ed really did love her, though not in a way that was healthy to her or to Ed. After Terri and Ed separated, Ed made threats against Terri and Mel, and finally committed suicide. The second couple, Nick and Laura, had both been previously married to other people. Carver doesn t state the circumstances surrounding their subsequent divorces, and only states that they met at work and started a relationship that led to marriage. Carver describes Nick and Laura as still on the Honeymoon (439). They are still at the point in their relationship where they are very affectionate toward one another, which contrasts with Mel and Terri s somewhat grating remarks to each other. In Carver s Couples Talk About Love, Fred Moramarco describes the relationship between Nick and Laura as a relationship of what we might call lite intimacy . Referring to Carver s description of Laura as being easy to be with (439), Moramarco states, This is the ideal contemporary relationship between a man and a woman who are friends as well as lovers, and the operative word here is easy. We all seek easy relationships, but the real world keeps intruding. Carver seems to describe both couples as being together more because of convenience, rather than any strong need or desire to be with each other. Moramarco refers to this situation as Serial, transient love. During the course of the conversation, Mel introduces the third couple later in the story, by telling Nick and Laura a story about them. Moramarco describes the way in which they are compared with the other two couples: Both Mel and Terri on the one hand, and Nick and Laura on the other as well as Mel and Marjorie and Terri and Ed are contrasted with yet another couple referred to in the story, an elderly couple in their mid-seventies who have been in an auto accident. Significantly, their camper was slammed by a teenage drunk driver who was killed in the accident. The old couple survived, but just barely. Carver intends the couple to represent our traditional conception of love lifetime monogamy a love that lasts until death do us part. What troubles Mel about the love between this old couple is that the husband is upset not so much because he and his wife are badly injured, but because his face is bandaged so severely he cannot move his head and look at his wife. Moramarco goes on to explain this sort of dependent love is closer to the love that Ed had for Terri than any of the other couples described in Carver s story. Carver uses the subplots of the different couples to contrast against each other, and show that obsession and true love actually are much closer than many people may think. He also uses the subplots to provide some detail into the viewpoints that the different couples come from, in respect to the issue of love. The fact that Nick and Laura have much less to say may have to do with their comparative inexperience, at least as far as the length of their relationship. And, as Carver states, Mel McGinnis was talking. Mel McGinnis is a cardiologist, and sometimes that gives him the right.

Another technique that Carver uses in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, is imagery. Carver s use of imagery is somewhat subtle, but is used effectively to represent certain ideas in the story. The first use of imagery is that of light in the story. At the beginning of the story, Carver states that, Sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink (437). He later describes the light in various stages; The afternoon sun was like a presence in this room, the spacious light of ease and generosity (440), The sunshine inside the room was different now, changing, getting thinner (443), and The light was draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from (443). The light in the story is representative of the cycle of life, and directly relates to some of the symbolism that Carver uses in the story. Carver also uses imagery when describing the characters in various stages of intoxication. He states, Mel poured himself another drink. He looked at the label closely as if studying a long row of numbers. Then he slowly put the bottle down on the table and slowly reached for the tonic water (442-443). He goes on to say that Laura was having a hard time lighting her cigarette (443), and, He crossed one leg over the other. It seemed to take him a long time to do it (444). Carver is using the intoxication of the characters to again describe a life cycle. With the imagery of the light and the intoxication, he shows a cycle of a bright and coherent time that increasingly winds down, as if fading away. He uses words such as slowly many times, to illustrate how things tend to move at a slower pace later in life. This again relates to the symbolism elsewhere in the story. In an interesting turn, Carver uses alcohol itself as both imagery and symbolism in the story. As imagery, the alcohol, and the characters increasing consumption of it, is a statement about the unease that we have speaking about love and matters of the heart. It seems that the more the characters drink, the easier time they have baring their souls, and sharing their feelings. At the same time though, the thoughts and feelings they share become more and more disjointed and abstract in direct relation to the amount of alcohol that is consumed. For instance, later in the story, Mel starts talking of chefs and vassals, and the conversation seems to wander away from the topic of what love is. He also becomes more crude uses more profanity while he gets drunker. Carver states, Vassals, vessels, Mel said, what the fuck s the difference? You know what I meant anyway. All right, Mel said, So I m not educated. I learned my stuff. I m a heart surgeon, sure, but I m just a mechanic. I go in and fuck around and I fix things. Shit. Mel said.

Carver s use of symbolism is what really ties the story together. He uses three main symbols that sort of bring the theme of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love to the surface. Alcohol is a major symbol in this story, even though it also serves as a form of imagery. Alcohol in the story is used to symbolize the sort of love that has become pervasive in our society. In effect, it can be fun for a while, but in the end it leaves us unfilled, and feeling like we ve been run over by a truck. This is in direct contrast to Carver s use of food as a symbol in the story. In Carver s Couples Talk About Love, Moramarco states, Drinking is often contrasted with eating. Food is almost always presented as both nourishing and nurturing. Eating is a communal activity, while alcohol is a kind of empty substitute for it that neither nourishes nor nurtures but distorts and confuses. He goes on, All of the characters are hungry for love, but love as we too often experience it in the contemporary world is a shallow substitute for the real thing. Being hungry for love is one thing, but doing something about that hunger is another. Carver uses the imagery of waning light and growing intoxication as a metaphor for our journey through life. During this journey, too many of us settle for love that is unfulfilling (alcohol), instead of waiting to find a truer form of love (food). Finally, Carver uses the gin bottle itself as a symbol that represents the way we pass around the term love in the modern world, without ever really stopping to examine what it means. The point where Mel stopped and looked at the label closely as if studying a long row of numbers (443), illustrates his effort to understand, but he has become so drunk with alcohol (false love), that he fails to really grasp what he is looking at.

In What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, Raymond Carver examines the question of what love really is, and shows us that love in modern society as a throwaway commodity, is one of the greatest fallacies of our time. He attempts to get us to examine the question for ourselves, so that perhaps the concept of true love won t be lost or forgotten by the time our children s children head out to find love. He shows us that true love is about more than lust and comfort. It is about need, desire, longing, and intimacy of the sort that many of us don t ever know. Perhaps by asking ourselves the question What do we talk about when we talk about love? we may discover that the love that many of us settle for isn t the love we really want. In order to be true to ourselves we need to stop drinking from the bottle of Moramarco s Serial, transient love, and start looking for something a little more nourishing. For without nourishment, we as people, and as a society, can t grow, and will fade away as surely as the setting sun that Carver so eloquently describes.

Works Cited

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