Further Into a Deep, Complex Thing

In short stories, narrators both regulate what a reader knows and provide the means by which an author’s vision is realized. “A Small, Good Thing,” by Raymond Carver, is no different: in this story, the narrator guides the reader through a tale of suffering and redemption. Through a distinctive minimalist style, Carver selectively reveals the characters’ inner thoughts and feelings through the narrator’s limited omniscient perspective, leading to a powerful vision of human connection.

This writing style, so stripped of extraneous detail that it can be hard for a reader to follow, is characteristic of Carver’s work. Carver removes all redundancy, leaving only the bare minimum. For example, near the beginning, the narrator describes how the baker (a central character) had “just come to work and he’d be there all night, baking, and he was in no real hurry” (Carver 2586). Here, as in the rest of this story, the narrator doesn’t use fluff or filler: he rarely uses adjectives at all. This bare style is well suited to...
the tough characters we find in Carver’s texts. Gadi Taub suggests that “it is hard to empathize with [Carver’s] protagonists and narrators. They are usually insensitive, hardened, and inarticulate” (103). Taub is right to suggest that they are insensitive and hard, but they certainly are not inarticulate. I would describe them as “terse.” They say what needs to be said and nothing more.

The terse quality of Carver’s method extends beyond the narrator. Throughout the text Carver relies upon what has been termed “implicit communication” (Gearhart). With implicit communication, readers must interpret the more subtle shades of meaning in the context of the story’s action. Take the following exchange between Howard and the doctor:

“You said before he’s not in a coma. You wouldn’t call this a coma, then—would you, doctor?”

Howard waited. He looked at the doctor. (Carver 2591)

The dialogue asks the obvious question: Is Scotty — the young boy who was hit by a car and is Howard’s son — suffering from a coma? The father’s agony, only implied by his question, is highlighted in the mere act of looking.

Howard’s pause and subsequent gaze communicates the suspended hope and wishful thinking of a parent experiencing extreme trauma. As readers, we hold our breath as Howard waits.
This is a wonderful example of the “implicit communication” to which Gearhart refers. Gearhart points, as well, to the self-conscious quality of such moments: “this substitution of implicit communication for verbal inarticulateness becomes a self-conscious act on the part of the characters.”

The “implicit communication” of the characters (and of the narrator) in Carver’s stories is the product of careful crafting. In an interview on Dan Swaim’s Book Talk, Carver states that he enjoys rewriting stories more than writing them. He may begin with forty pages, only to pare it down to twenty before being satisfied. In “Raymond Carver and Postmodern Humanism,” Carver points out that in his works, “words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it’s also the things that are left out, that are implied” (qtd. in Brown). His style works by implication.

Indeed, Carver’s style leads to remarkable results in “A Small, Good Thing,” a reworking of an earlier story entitled “The Bath.” Identical in plot, “A Small, Good Thing” is, ironically, significantly longer. It also includes a new ending in which Ann and Howard confront the baker. Adam Meyer, in “Now You See Him, Now You Don’t,” summarizes the new ending by remarking how it “now ends on a note of communion, of shared understanding and grief,” unlike the earlier version.
In “A Small, Good Thing,” the baker is clearly at odds with himself. He tells Ann and Howard, “I’m not an evil man, I don’t think” (Carver 2600). He feels responsible for Howard’s and Ann’s pain. He begs their forgiveness and offers them food and a forum to discuss their feelings. It is almost as if he takes Howard and Ann’s loss as his own, suggesting a subconscious attempt at redeeming himself for his hard-heartedness or cynicism. “More significant, perhaps,” notes Gearhart, “is the salvation of Ann and Howard Weiss, for they win a self-conscious battle with inarticulateness and, in so doing, provide for the redemption of the baker.” In this case, the use of “inarticulateness” is fitting since Howard and Ann have difficulty expressing themselves to the baker. Gearhart points out that “the Weisses do not gain their epiphany through words, but through their ability to empathize with another’s pain in the time of their own sorrow.” Ann’s revelation of Scotty’s death to the baker provides an outlet of emotion that acts as her own absolution. The narrator reveals this, stating, “Just as suddenly as it had welled in her, the anger dwindled, gave way to something else, a dizzy feeling of nausea” (2599). It is at this moment that Ann’s redemption begins.

This new ending, pitting the baker against Howard and Ann, is a significant departure from “The Bath.” Carver himself notes that “it’s different in conception and different in execution than

This story appears in an anthology. The parenthetical citation should include the name of the author of the story (not the editor of the anthology) and the page number.

“Sandwich” direct quotation from the text between your claim (that it is supporting) and a follow-up clarification of significance.

Because the previous citation is from the same source, there is no need to repeat the author’s name. All that is required is the page number.

Use present tense verbs when discussing literary works.

Vary the position of signal phrases—they can appear in the middle or at the end of direction quotation, as well as in the beginning.

Use present tense verbs in signal phrases.
The earlier stories ... it's a much fuller story and if you look at the last paragraphs ... I think it's opening up to something entirely different” (Swaim). The difference signals a shift in Carver's philosophy. Much of his earlier work was influenced by his persistent battle with alcoholism. However, this later rewrite is much more optimistic. The new version is not really about the tragedy that occurs to Scotty; it's about Howard, Ann, and the baker and how they transcend their problems.

This philosophical shift is made obvious via the method by which the narrator in “A Small, Good Thing” reveals the story. The narrator’s limited omniscience is a direct reflection of what Taub calls Carver’s “moral vision.” For Taub, Carver’s narrators do not “usurp his protagonist’s feelings, amplify them, or try to create a drama in the text apart from their own sense of what is happening to them” (103). In other words, the narrator’s point of view resists sentimentality while creating real empathy for Ann and Howard. Although the narrator’s “inarticulateness” or terseness might appear to create a distance or gap between text and reader, what it really accomplishes (in a quiet, still way) is a human bond that lives up to Carver’s new sense of optimism.

Ultimately, Carver is a difficult writer to follow for someone who is unfamiliar with his work. However, a careful study of his narrator’s complex point of view reveals the mastery of his vision
in "A Small, Good Thing." The death of Scotty is a tragedy, but the essence of the story is the redemption and absolution achieved by Howard, Ann, and the baker. Taub sums it up well: “What is offering hot rolls with butter in the face of the loss of a child? But it is a small good thing” (115). Indeed it is.


