

What *Do* We Talk About When We Talk About Love?
True Love, Passionate Love, and Pining in the Short Fiction of Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff

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ABSTRACT

Love exists in many forms: love between family members, love between friends and significant others, and generally, love of a person for every entity or object in-between. From love between a man and fish, to the love of alcohol, familial or fraternal relationships, and, finally, romantic love, Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff depict love in its many forms in their short fiction. This thesis specifically explores the portrayal of romantic love in Carver's story "Beginners" from the collection *Beginners* and Wolff's story "Maiden Voyage" from *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*. The characters in these stories form a spectrum of love. From the ideal love of Henry and Anna Gates or the modern, simple love, of Nick and Laura in "Beginners," to the passionless love of Howard and Nora in "Maiden Voyage," by analyzing the relationships in these stories this thesis concludes that *love* does exist differently for every marriage. While all relationships can have *love* in a broad sense, some of these loves are more powerful and lasting than others.

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Love exists in many forms: love between family members, love between friends and significant others, and generally, love of a person for every entity or object in-between. From love between a man and fish, to the love of alcohol, familial or fraternal relationships, and, finally, romantic love, Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff depict love in these many forms in their short fiction. This thesis specifically explores the portrayal of romantic love in Carver's story "Beginners" from the collection *Beginners*¹ and Wolff's story "Maiden Voyage" from *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*. It considers the abstract concept of *true love* and the variations of it that exist within different relationships. Combined, the two stories yield the interpretation that while all relationships can have *love* in a broad sense, some of these loves are more powerful and lasting than others.

Carver's "Beginners" and Wolff's "Maiden Voyage" are stories about two couples in different stages of their relationship and are in conversation with each other; they share a fundamental basis in the literary style of minimalism. The minimalist style developed from the postmodern tradition, rebuking the extreme focus on detail and excruciating explanations of the 1950s and 1960s. But what is minimalism? In a basic sense, minimalism can be defined purely stylistically: a short sentence structure, terse dialogue, and a use of blunt irony (Facknitz, 1989). The style focuses on surface level descriptions of scenes and limits backstory and unnecessary prose. However, beyond the general structure of the short stories, Carver and Wolff's minimalism serves the greater purpose of hiding the broader meaning of the story, presenting it with a general ambiguity. Minimalism allows for multiple interpretations of the same story: to some extent, these stories almost appear to be meaningless. The stories are simply presented as

¹ *Beginners* is the unedited version of Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. There is particular contention regarding the editorial influence of Gordon Lish, Carver's editor, on the Carver's writing style. For the purpose of this thesis, the original version of the story provides a more raw and multi-faceted depiction of love and represents Carver's original vision. See Clark, 2012 <https://doi.org/10.1515/jls-2012-0010>

stories about life, and the impetus is placed on the reader to figure out if and where meaning exists within them. Considered in the context of love, minimalism encompasses ambiguity regarding a definitive resolution to the true nature of *love*. Instead, minimalism shifts the focus to the smaller details, glimpsing into personal relationships as parts of an incomplete definition of *love*.

Carver creates an older couple of Herb and Terri and a younger couple of Nick and Laura. Wolff depicts a couple on their 50th wedding anniversary, Howard and Nora, and two newlyweds, Ron and Stella. Carver's "Beginners" depicts a simple scene of the two couples drinking and talking about love, which quickly evolves into a complex reflection on past loves and the definition of *love*. Wolff creates a seemingly simple story of a couple on a cruise for their 50th wedding anniversary. In "Beginners," Herb McGinnis, a cardiologist, challenges that his second wife, Terri's ex-lover² Carl could have loved her because he abused her. Herb and Terri discuss this with Nick and Laura, a recently married couple (also former divorcees), while drinking gin and revealing inner truths about each character's seemingly different views on *love*. The story contains many contrived and subtle commentaries about the undefinable nature of *true love*, and the seemingly inevitable lack of being *in love* in marriage. Every character in "Beginners" seems to believe that they are in love, even though in the way that the other characters define love they are not. Herb and Terri do not have Nick and Laura's simple love, and Nick and Laura's love is only a temporary phase in the eyes of Herb and Terri. This is perhaps to say Carver's eventual conclusion is that none of the characters in "Beginners" would understand what it means to authentically *love* one another, even if the characters seem think that they do: we are all eternally "beginners" (182) at love. Wolff's cruise ship of empty love in

² The precise nature of their relationship is unclear; although Terri has been married previously it may not have been to Carl.

“Maiden Voyage” presents differently: Ron appears to have pursued his true love in Stella, whereas Howard did not end up marrying his “great love” (97), Miriam Selby. Through his characters, Wolff’s claim through these men is a bit more qualified than Carver’s: it is not that we do not understand or find *love*, it is that our understanding and our theory of *love* oftentimes differs from our practice. Carver and Wolff’s couples have one fundamental difference, which is that Carver’s characters are all divorced and remarried. The contrast between remarried couples and singly married couples allows subtly different conclusions on love to be drawn from each story, both introspectively and in terms of their general thematic implications. Thus, by examining the characters from Carver and Wolff’s stories the reader can examine the contrast between older and younger couples, as well as the contrast between remarried couples and couples currently in their first marriage.

The characters in Carver’s “Beginners” and Wolff’s “Maiden Voyage” all appear to have different definitions of the nebulous general concept of *love*. However, in the context of the extent to which *love* exists in the characters’ relationships, there is only one clear distinction depicted by Wolff and Carver: being *in love* and *loving* each other. Neither constructs an end-all definition for love but being *in love* is associated with an indelible passion between both partners and a general romantic and sexual attraction. On the other hand, *loving* each other is a broader abstract concept: *loving* could be as simple as enjoying spending time with each other, or *loving* someone could just develop out of the length of a relationship. Carver further defines “pining,” which exists in a relationship when there is a combination of both *loving* each other and being *in love* with one another.

Although Carver does not fully develop the backstories of the characters in “Beginners” he attempts to define his characters as archetypes. In “Beginners” Carver presents Herb McGinnis’s cluelessness and amateur skill level in love as an archetype for Americans specifically.

The story starts by establishing “we lived in Albuquerque, but we were all from somewhere else” (179) and furthers the generalization of the story with “we could have been anywhere” (184). The characters in “Beginners” are from somewhere and could be anywhere, which allows readers to imagine themselves in this story. Herb and Terri, and Laura and Nick could be any set of married couples, sitting on a back porch drinking a lot of gin. Their story and the general cluelessness argue that these characters may never understand love, and “what they talk about when they talk about love” is every single person when they attempt to rationalize and understand love. Humans can only just talk about love. In short, the treatise of the short story “Beginners” and the collection *Beginners* is that all humans are eternally “beginners” at love.

Herb McGinnis states this clearly in his mini-thesis on love: “But it seems to me we’re just rank beginners at love. We say we love each other and we do, I don’t doubt it. [...] But sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife, too” (184). Earlier, Carver also states: “Herb thought real love was nothing less than spiritual love” (179). For Herb, this spiritual love represents an intense emotional desire to be around and interact with the other person’s spirit. It is also important to note that Herb is the only character in the story to explicitly attempt to define love. His definition contrasts with the views of the other characters and points to the inherent conflict between a goal of spiritual love and the concept of beginning at love. If spiritual love is the goal, then the possibility that they will never be anything but beginners forms a pillar for understanding the rest of the story: none of the characters in the story will reach this level of spiritual love.

The key to parsing Herb’s definition of spiritual love is the story of the elderly couple, Henry and Anna Gates. Following a car accident, an elderly couple end up in the hospital, where Herb cares for them and gives the man daily updates on his wife’s health and discusses their love: “I’m telling you,” Herb informs his friend, “he pined for her. I never knew what that word

meant before, pined, until I saw it happening to this man” (192). Henry and Anna Gates have the sort of spiritual love that Herb views as *love*. However, there seems to be a deeper level to their spiritual love as well. Henry told Herb: “If you’re quiet and your mind is clear and you’re at peace with yourself and all things, you can lay in the dark and hear it snow” (193). This quote presents an underlying representation of the foundation of true love: a tranquility and peace with all things, romantic and not.

For Carver, Henry and Anna Gates are what Herb and the reader think that love should be. According to Herb, Henry is on the verge of death because he is unable to see his wife; the two had “only been apart from each other for any time on two occasions” (192) since they were married and “he just longed for her company” (192). The overwhelming, unquestioning desire to be with one’s spouse is the “spiritual love” (179) that Herb desires. Henry Gates “pines”³ (192) for his wife: he misses the spirit of his wife and needs to be around her to be complete himself. So, although Herb states that he views love as “spiritual love” (179), it seems that more than spiritual love Herb defines love as pining, and specifically, a pining for someone else’s spirit. Because of the general longevity of their relationship and their persistent romantic connection Henry and Anna are an ideal depiction of marriage. Thus, by contrasting their marriage with the seeming inadequacy of Herb and Terri’s marriage, or the simplicity of Nick and Laura’s marriage, the couples conversing in the story are not an ideal representation of *love* and must be viewed differently. Herb and Terri’s relationship especially evinces many negative sentiments which Henry and Anna’s never even hints at. Nick and Laura on the other hand simply enjoy being around each other, perhaps a modern representation of the similar longing that Henry has for

³ One of the earliest uses of the word “pine” defined, in terms of love, as “to yearn; to languish with desire, to hunger for something; to long eagerly” is from *Romeo and Juliet*: “The new-made Bridegroom..For whome, and not for Tibalt, Iuliet pinde.” (“Pine, v7”). The parallel of Henry and Anna Gates as Romeo and Juliet further strengthens the argument for former as archetypal lovers.

Anna. It could be that Herb, Terri, Nick, and Laura are unable to reach this ideal of Henry and Anna's marriage because they have been divorced already, or possibly because their *love* is modern *love*: nobody knows how to *love* like Henry and Anna in the modern world.

Herb reacts very differently to this type of *love* in Gordon Lish's edited "What We Talk When We Talk About Love." Lish, the editor who is known for dramatically changing many of Carver's story, transforms the character of Herb into Mel, who treats the elderly couple's story very differently, he says: "I mean, it was killing the old fart just because he couldn't look at the fucking woman." (183) Here Mel treats Anna and Henry's relationship with contempt and a general air of disgust, whereas Herb desires the love that they have, placing it on a pedestal. Mel similarly contradicts himself by criticizing a representation of his own definition of spiritual love, the spiritual pining of Henry for Anna, or herein acknowledges that he himself will never attain this spiritual love. In the original version, "Beginners," Herb's character is more sympathetic. Although it does seem that Herb is jealous because he cannot have the same kind of spiritual love that he views as the only form of *love*, Herb does not treat that *love* with the contempt of Mel, he simply pines for it.

Herb's confusion of the terms vessel and vassal symbolically demonstrates the Herb does not understand his own definition of spiritual love even though he thinks he does. Despite his obvious education Herb does not seem know the difference between vessels and vassals. Herb interrupts his own substory of Henry and Anna Gates to talk about how we are all a "vessels to someone else" (189). Herb's confusion of terms vessel and vassal relates his definition of spiritual love to the simpler version of *love* depicted by Nick's relationship with Laura. Herb makes an error of substituting vessel for vassal and then explains himself: "Vassals, vessels,

ventricles, vas deferens⁴. Well, you know what I mean anyways” (189). The relation of these words signifies different meanings for how all human humans relate to one another in different forms of *love*. A vassal signifies that humans are subordinate to others when *in love*, only servants to the people that we are *in love* with. A vessel signifies that we are empty unless filled by someone else and is also a double entendre for the blood vessels that transport blood throughout the body, or, in this sense, convey love. The ventricle and the vas deferens are biological terms that take on specific importance with Carver’s presentation of Herb McGinnis as a cardiologist. The ventricles are the four chambers of the heart that pump and supply blood to the rest of the body, so Carver also claims that two people need one another in love: our hearts cannot function without each other and without *love*. Finally, the vas deferens is a duct that conveys sperm, the sexual aspect of being *in love*. Herb’s position as a cardiologist⁵ then represents his role in “supplying life” so to speak to his wife, Terri. Herb, however, does not recognize Terri’s emotional dependence on past love: Terri is still a vessel for the *love* she shared with Carl, and thus her breakdown at the end of the story is moreover representative of Herb’s failure in his job to heal matters of the heart than it is in Terri’s unresolved emotional turmoil.

In the same sense of Herb’s confusion, the other characters in “Beginners” continue to talk about *love* while not appearing to understand anything about it. The characters’ different views on *love* provide the central tension for the story. Terri and Herb directly disagree about the obsessive love of Terri’s ex-husband Carl: “‘It was love,’ Terri said. ‘Sure it was abnormal in most people’s eyes, but he was willing to die for it. He did die for it’” (183). Carl depended on Terri emotionally, as is clear through his suicide following their breakup. Terri, for her part, also

⁴ Ventricles and vas deferens are omitted in the later published “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.”

⁵ The position of Herb as a cardiologist also differs from Carver’s general “dirty realism” that generally depicts working class Americans. The characters in “Beginners” appear to be middle or upper-middle class (Kita, 2014). This could be necessary simply to set the scene: it is impossible to have a poor heart doctor. However, it also could serve to reflect a deeper inability of the working class to reflect on a concept such as love.

seemed to share some emotional connection with him. When Terri defends Carl's love for her, she says: "But he loved me. In his own way, maybe, but he loved me. There was love there, Herb. Don't deny me that" (180). Terri needs her relationship with Carl to have been love and she relies on Herb to verify that for her; without love, her relationship with Carl would have simply been abuse. Further, Carl would have committed suicide for no reason. To defend this toxic love, Terri seeks the approval of Herb, hinting that she could be in another toxic relationship now. Herb refuses to believe that what Carl and Terri had was love because of the violent nature of their relationship. Herb cannot reconcile this violence with his feelings towards his ex-wife: Herb no longer loves his ex-wife, he "hates her guts" (184) in same violent way that Carl treated Terri. Herb says about his ex-wife: "But at one time I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself, and we had the kids together. But now I hate her guts. I do. How do you figure that?" (184). Herb is unable to comprehend how he could have ever loved someone if he does not love them currently: Herb's understanding of love is only based on his present feelings. Herb does not discount the possibility that Carl once loved Terri. Herb does, however, hold that Carl beating Terri meant that he could not have loved her at that specific time; Herb and his ex-wife's relationship and Terri and Carl's relationship could then imply that *love* changes over time, and sometimes within that, will begin and end. Terri instead holds that it is difficult to detach from *love*: once you have loved someone you cannot escape that *love*.

In this sense, Terri and Carl's relationship could serve to comment that *love* can exist in toxic relationships. Herb seemingly confirms the relationship between abuse and *love*, saying "Terri's of the 'Kick-me-so-I'll-know-you-love-me' school." (180). However, it could be that Herb justifies his own emotional abuse of Terri. While attempting to tell his story of the elderly couple, Herb treats Terri very harshly: "Just shut up for a minute, will you?" Herb said. "Let me tell this. It's been on my mind. Just shut up for a minute." (186) Thus, in order to rationalize

his own toxic behavior Herb places blame for Terri staying with Carl on a perceived, almost masochistic, view of love: Terri's personality is such that Carl's abuse may have been how Terri understands that he loved her, and Herb's verbal abuse could be how Terri now understands that Herb loves her. Terri stays with Herb because for her, abuse is not incompatible with *love*. *Love*, by extension, sometimes only serves to hurt the parties involved.

The characters in "Beginners" also seem to define *love* more explicitly. Terri's arc implies a simple definition of *love* as commitment. When Herb initially talks about *love* he defines "Sexual love, that attraction to the other person, the partner, as well as just the plain everyday kind of love, [...] call it sentimental love, the day-to-day caring about the other" (184). Herb's definition of spiritual love is the combination of these two, the "spiritual pining" of Henry and Anna Gates. Terri's definition of *love* exists purely in terms of this "sentimental love" (184). Her continued attachment to Carl is explicable because she still cares about him because she regrets her choices in the relationship: "after he'd been gone for a while and there was no Carl anymore to talk to [...] I felt real bad about things" (199). Thus, Terri's definition of love is one that can transcend the relationship, and Herb discounts this because his own definition of *love* necessitates a sexual love as well. Herb's detestation for his ex-wife is the opposite of Terri's continued sentimental love for Carl: Herb has moved on from being *in love* with his former wife, and as such in his eyes he can no longer possibly *love* her. Terri's definition of pure sentimental love, which can transcend abuse, competes with Herb's definition of spiritual love.⁶ Their conflict can be partially justified in terms of the power imbalance in Herb and Terri's relationship. Herb is fifteen years older than Terri and views her as a "hippie" (179). The age difference coupled with his seeming protection and fostering of Terri makes Herb a father figure for her. Herb as the stable

⁶ In terms of this definition it additionally seems doubtful that Herb is authentic when saying that he "loves" Terri. Although he proclaims this on multiple occasions, his actions and treatment of Terri (e.g. saying that he would marry Laura) seem to contradict any sort of "spiritual love" that Herb would have for her.

doctor/father figure seems to be more the ruler than partner of Terri, thus explaining why Herb is unable to bridge the gap between their two differing views. Even the heart expert still has something to learn about the complexity of love. Another reason for the conflicting definition could also exist because Terri's definition of love is also harder to parse than Herb's: she does not seem to completely understand why she still loves Carl. One possibility beyond the explanation of sentimental love is simple: there is no actual explanation for why Terri loves Carl. Terri cannot understand *love* because *love* itself cannot be understood; Herb thinks that he can and does understand *love*.

Herb's relationship with *love* accepts parts of Terri's unchanging view of *love* and rejects others. Herb is disgusted by his ex-wife, but he still loves one aspect of their marriage: his children. Outside of this fatherly love for his children, Herb's relationship with *love* is more troubled. Herb says of Terri's love for the abusive Carl: "If that's love, you can have it." (183). Herb contradicts this in his own relationship with Terri: he tells her to "shut up" (186) and, combined with his doubt of Carl's love for her, causes Terri to question her own relationship with the concept of *love* in part leading to her emotional breakdown. Herb is whistling in the shower, oblivious to his wife's unease. Herb's behavior at the end of the story is built up to through the bickering and a general underlying fakeness of his and Terri's relationship. For example, Herb and Terri constantly call each other "honey" when they fight over their different definitions of *love*. The meaningless endearment of honey is treated almost as an aggressive phrase. Terri asks "Are you getting drunk, Herb? Honey, are you drunk?" (185). The tone of Terri's "honey" reflects a deeper conflict between Herb and Terri. Herb and Terri are fighting while maintaining appearances for the sake of their guests and potentially the sake of the reader. The motif of honey presents itself later in the story where Herb turns "his fingers into bees and buzz[es] them at Terri's throat" (196) Herb's "finger bees" attack his wife, his honey, and in a

broader sense represent another act of aggression from Herb, an attack on something “sweet” in Herb and Terri’s marriage. Herb and Terri might be *in love*, but it does not seem like they *love* one another.

Nick and Laura’s relationship competes with Terri and Herb’s to present a refined interpretation of *love*. Herb and Terri do not have the same kind of simple and pain-free relationship that Nick and Laura have. Nick and Laura’s relationship presents with a similar tranquility to that of Henry and Anna Gates. At the end of the story Nick appears to have a similar moment to the observation of the falling snow when he notices: “Yet there was light, too, and it seemed to be softening those things I looked at” (199). Nick’s observation of the light represents his peace with the world and with his relationship with Laura: a simple, unflinching love. Nick says of Laura: “In addition to being in love, we like each other and enjoy one another’s company. She’s easy to be with” (182). The latter section, the concept of being “easy to be with” (182) appears to be enough for Nick and Laura as a couple. When Terri is crying, Laura comforts her and rubs her shoulders, and Nick is comically oblivious, performing the seemingly random act of “eating a piece of salami” (199). Nick and Laura’s *love* allows Laura to take care of Terri instead of Nick and Laura taking care of each other: extending their *love* outside of their own relationship. For Nick and Laura, *love* has more parts to it than something more than just the “*vas deferens*,” the pining of love. Terri dismisses Nick and Laura’s *love* as a “honeymoon” (183). This appears to be another reference to the motif of honey: honey is fake and cloyingly sweet, exemplifying the dishonesty of how Terri and Herb use it in their argument. Carl’s *love* is neediness, an almost love-addiction to Terri. Terri’s *love* for Herb is possibly Terri’s similar love-addiction to Herb. This *love* seems less powerful because they appear to exist without that simple addition of liking each other too. However, because of the conflict, another possibility is that none of these couples understand *love* at all. Terri discounts The seemingly successful parts of

Nick and Laura's marriage, while at the same time, Terri and Herb seem to discount the value of their own *love* by arguing. Even if these characters think that they are *in love*, they are still just ignorant "beginners" at *true love*.

The apparent ignorance of the human species is also reflected in the original manuscript's view of Nick's character. Gordon Lish creates a different ending in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" than existed in the original "Beginners." "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" ends with the now-famous line: "I could feel my heart beating. I could feel everyone's heart. I could feel the human noise we stood there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark" (Carver, 185). Nick's original reflection about love in "Beginners" is a much less powerful sentiment, Nick says: "I stood there and waited and watched the grass bend in the wind. I could feel my heart beating" (199-200). Monti's criticism interprets this shift in the final sentence to be a dark edit by Lish. "Through Lish's lens, Carver's world often comes across as a dark hole, where very little hope is left" (Monti, 2008). In the context of "Beginners," this claim seems somewhat dubious. Instead of focusing specifically on Nick's heart, Lish's edits broaden the scope of the story to everyone's heart. Lish's revised ending is hopeful: perhaps we may never discover what is in everyone's heart, but there is something there, something beating. Carver's original ending focuses solely on Nick: "I stood at the window and waited. I knew I had to keep still a while longer [...] as long as there was something left to see." (200). It is unclear what Nick is waiting for: true love? An escape from this Western purgatory? However, it does seem at the very least that Nick is mildly indifferent to the *love* he shares with Laura. Like the grass Nick watches before everything becomes dark, the wind, or the nature of the world, blows Nick. In "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" Nick's conclusion on *love* is not one of indifference, but one of accentuated simplicity. *Love* is trivial for Nick, but he does not trivialize it. By feeling everyone's heart beating,

the conclusion of the edited version is that when we talk about love, we do not know what we are talking about. We only know that we feel *love*, each of us in our own different ways.⁷

Tobias Wolff's "Maiden Voyage" continues Carver's seemingly ambiguous views on the nature of *love*. Wolff presents another pair of couples: one younger and one older, who represent the different fallacies of any concrete definition about what it means to be in love, and furthermore, what it means to be successful in marriage. Like Carver's collection, throughout *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* Wolff examines divorces, friendships, and marriages to comment on their reality contrasted with how they might otherwise be viewed in society. "Maiden Voyage" depicts two different types of marriages. Wolff juxtaposes old and young couples to argue that the ideal *true love*, or the spiritual pining defined by "Beginners," is not necessary in the modern marriage, but that these marriages still have a different, fundamental *love*. Howard and Nora are a couple at their 50th "golden" wedding anniversary; Stella and Ron have been married for 3 days. Despite this difference, both couples are initially presented as equally uncertain about their loves. Ron and Stella never discuss *love*, and Howard is not *in love* with Nora. This void is clear in Stella's reference to Howard's "great love" (98). Stella says: "Not Nora, Howard. She's your wife. [...] Anyone can see she's not your great love" (98). Stella's claim at its outset seems authentic: Howard does not disagree. Nor does he appear to love Nora

⁷ In the context of Lish's edits, it is also interesting to note the "Beginners" is an atypical scene in the collection, perhaps one of the reasons that Lish edited it down, making the story much more minimalist. There is no driving plot device or true central tension, "Beginners" is simply a story about a group of people getting drunk talking about love and the possible ways we could define it. The plot of the story is perhaps the easiest to understand of the collection, but the thematic presentation of *love* is vague and left unresolved. This lack of resolution is synthesized by Lish's change in the title. Carver's story is titled "Beginners," and Lish's edited version is titled the far more ambiguous "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." The title "Beginners" implies a thesis in Herb's definition of love: we are all just "beginners" at love. With the change to "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" eliminates this thesis: these characters are just talking without any purpose or reason beyond exploring the different possibilities of love. The title change also represents an underlying shift by Lish to create ambiguity in the story by increasing its minimalistic tendencies. Examples of this in "Beginners" include through the trimming of the story of the elderly couple and the removal of the "Library" (188) symbol. The increased ambiguity in Lish's edited version perhaps then implies that there is no true answer to the question "What *Do* We Talk About When We Talk About Love?"

in any great way—in fact, Howard goes so far as to describe Nora’s appearance as akin to “Harry Truman, for whom Howard had not voted” (90). However, a more nuanced interpretation of Howard and Nora’s marriage reveals one type of a simpler, “successful” marriage for Wolff. Successful marriage and *love* therein can be created through a stable commitment. On a surface level Howard and Nora have been together for 50 years, seemingly committed to only each other; Howard and Nora have two children.⁸ This longevity establishes an initial resolution to the concept of success in marriage: perhaps a successful marriage in terms of *love* is nothing more than a marriage that lasts. Howard and Nora are a “golden” (92) couple; however, Wolff uses this concept of a golden marriage as a double entendre to reference the idea of a gilded marriage. Throughout “Maiden Voyage” Howard and Nora are praised as having a perfect marriage by Bill Tweed. However, this endorsement is somewhat questionable: Bill is presented as a repulsive character. He initially says: “My mother keeps telling me I should take a wife but I haven’t decided yet whose wife I’m going to take.’ He winked at Howard” (91). This passage foreshadows Bill’s rendezvous with Stella, but also giving him a general air of dishonesty, in part reflecting on the overwhelming fake air of American consumerism. Bill has a job to create a “good time” for everyone on the cruise, so his description of Nora and Howard as a golden couple, as well as symbols like the interlocking heart life preservers, then, are clichéd representations of what society considers *true love* to be. Wolff hints at the true underlying meaning of the golden marriage by using the seemingly innocuous object of Stella’s fillings: Howard sees “the dank glimmer of gold in her back teeth” (93). Stella has gold fillings. Fillings disguise an internal rot, and Stella’s fillings are a proxy for other golden things, specifically

⁸ However, the children themselves are questionable. The son is possibly in jail, the daughter is “retarded” (91). In this passage Howard could also just be falsely antagonizing Nora by making a rather dark joke to Bill Tweed.

Howard and Nora's marriage. Although Howard and Nora's marriage may seem gold on the outside, the golden longevity is the filling of the cavity in their marriage where love should be.

Wolff parallels the use of gold with the different costumes of the characters at the end of the story. Every character in the story dresses in a contradiction. Nora dresses as Venus, the Roman goddess of love. The leaves in her hair, however, give the costume a "Greek accent" (98). This is a lie because Nora is not truly a romantic character in the story and is not Howard's goddess: Howard does not seem to be *in love* with her at all, nor does it seem like he was at any point in time. Howard is dressed as a makeshift pirate serving to represent a solo life as a marauder, but, really, Howard is just masquerading in that garb, as beneath the eyepatch is the costume of a squire—a noble servant. Howard's costume could then represent a truth within his relationship: Howard is still learning to be noble; he is still learning about how to be a partner in a marriage. Nora, in the true role of a squire, bears the weight of the relationship and its success. Stella dresses as poor woman, yet continues to wear her crown of fake diamonds, which, in and of itself is another contradiction. Ron's costume is the only one that is not an obvious contradiction: he is dressed as a Confederate officer and "looked unhappy" (98). Ron symbolizes a lost cause: Ron's marriage to Stella is an inevitable defeat. The characters hide the inner truths about themselves. Nora's costume represents what she desires to be: a goddess of love. Howard hides his dependence on Nora and his possible underlying *love* for her. Ron hides that his marriage with Stella is already over, and Stella seems to think that she can be simple, a peasant wife to Ron.

Ron's costume is particularly pertinent in the historical context of an open marriage. Ron, the confederate war general, already seems to have already "lost" Stella to the open marriage she claims they have. The same year *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* was released, a study found that 80% of open marriages created jealousy from the partners (Buunk,

1981). Although Howard also says he is in an open marriage, his and Nora's relationship makes that inconceivable. Howard and Nora's marriage predates the concept of an open marriage; the term was coined in 1972 by O'Neill and O'Neill and only became truly popular in the 1970s (Janus & Janus, 1993). Stella's open marriage is solely her choice; it is also possible that Stella and Ron do not have an open marriage, and Stella simply cheats on him. Stella views love like picking flowers: "you keep picking things until you get the one that really matters" (97). In this pursuit of "great love" (98) Stella has "pick[ed]" (97) Ron, but it does not appear that he is "the one that really matters" (97) to her. Love is not marriage for Stella. Thus, in picking Ron Stella has cast metaphorically cast him aside, irreparably damaging him in the process. The fleeting state of Ron and Stella's relationship corresponds to the statistics on open marriage: in the late 1970s there were several reflections on the period of open marriage, including a *New York Times* article that published George O'Neill's⁹ somber reflection that the couples that were honest about their adultery did not last: "I think the longest was two years" (Dullea, 1977). An open marriage like Ron and Stella's would then not be expected to last. To justify staying with Stella to himself, twice Ron repeats the phrase "you ought to see her with kids" (96), rationalizing Stella's seemingly immoral choices. Ron views their marriage in terms of a long-term family life, however it is doubtful that their marriage will ever reach that point, and, even if he did, Ron would never be certain if their kids were even biologically his. Ron and Stella's marriage being "open" directly threatens the persistence of their *love*.

Howard's marriage, instead of being challenged by the concept of new partners, appears to be threatened by the past. Specifically, Nora is threatened by Stella and who she represents for Howard. On a surface level, Stella is a young and attractive female who flirts with Howard,

⁹ One of the authors of *Open Marriage*

but beyond the superficial, the name Stella evokes images of stars. Wolff uses her name to represent an idea of wishes and, for Howard, his true romantic desire. Tweed asks Howard: “Evening, Dad. Stargazing, are you? We’re never too old for dreams.” (96). Stella is the star that Howard is gazing at in his dream. The reader additionally learns that Stella resembles Miriam Selby, the woman implied as Howard’s great love (i.e. *true love*), thus it is less that Howard is attracted to Stella than to Stella as a representation and reminder of Miriam Selby. Wolff further implies that Miriam is a source of recurring conflict between Howard and Nora. Howard and Nora’s terse exchange about *love* implies that Howard does not *love* Nora, at least in the way that she *loves* him: “‘Do you love me?’ she said. // ‘Sure. Sure I do.’ // ‘You never say so’” (94). Wolff’s use of syntax with the split sentences indicates to the reader that Howard seems very indifferent towards Nora and the concept of marriage. When Nora asks Howard how she looks, he responds “you look all right” (90). Howard seems fundamentally uninterested in *love*, or at the very least, the person who he is supposed to *love*. The narrator implies that Howard either could or could not *love* Nora, but he is at the least, unsure that he *loves* her. Howard possibly just plays the role of a good husband, or possibly just considers *love* irrelevant in the context of longevity of their relationship. Howard’s indifference can be considered in several ways: a pessimistic reading could imply that Howard does not *love* Nora at all. However, the more robust reading is that Howard’s *love* and a loving marriage are simpler than society makes it out to be. It does not take being *in love* to have persistent *love* in a marriage

The difference between *loving* one another and being *in love* is well represented with regard to power imbalances in “Maiden Voyage:” Nora appears to be *in love* with Howard, but it does not seem that Howard is in love with her. Particularly at the beginning of the story, Howard and Nora are unbalanced, before criticizing her mislabeling of the ship’s parts, Howard says to Nora: “You don’t have your sea legs yet” (89). Nora loves Howard more than Howard loves

her, if Howard loves her at all. Throughout the story Nora is upset at Howard's fixation with Stella because she resembles the Miriam, his great love. Wolff relates Howard's character to Stella's when Stella says: "People like us shouldn't get married. We have too much passion for just one person" (93). But Howard does not appear to be passionate at all, and he holds power over Nora because of this. The ending presents an ambiguous yet optimistic outlook for this marital imbalance: Howard turned slowly around to escape Stella's grin, and above it, the winking of her tiara in the moving red light" (100). For the first time in the story, Howard and Nora are close to one another. Howard says to Nora: "You're getting your sea legs," (100) perhaps representing a greater balance for Nora in the marriage, with Nora dancing literally on equal footing with Howard. However, even in this greater balance Howard still attempts to escape the red warning light of a sinking ship, the red light of his past, and the woman that reminds him of the woman he used to love.

The red light and Howard's past relate to the motif of war in the story and the representation of *love* as a type of war. Throughout *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, Wolff presents his characters with the intent to explore the various ways in which they all represent the concept of martyrdom. From the expulsion of Eugene in "Smokers" to the traditional war-death martyrdom of "Wingfield," every story in the collection has a character that sacrifices at the behest of some institution and in relation to war and conflict. Many of these sacrifices are a result of obsession, or in some sense, sacrifices of *love*: either fraternal, romantic, or familial in nature. "Maiden Voyage" revolves around Howard's experience and worldview. Wolff uses the motif of war to present Howard as a martyr of the concept of *true love*: he is a martyr for staying married to Nora who is not his great love. As a character, Howard is unable to escape his past, WWI, submarines, and barometers, and within this past, Howard is specifically unable to escape being in love with Miriam Selby. When Howard first reaches his

room, he checks the barometer twice. This is the first hint that even in the modern day Howard is still stuck within his troubled past and furthermore currently “under pressure” so to speak. Additionally, when Howard first boards the ship he uses the intercom as if he were still the submarine operator of his youth. The narrator then reveals Howard’s fears of being captured by the Germans, a fear that he has maintained since his participation in WWI. Within this, Howard specifically describes “his German” (94), the German coming after him. The German represents a substitution for Howard: there is no German actually hunting him down, the war ended 40 years ago. The German always coming for him is Miriam: the life that Howard didn’t live through and the “smartest decision he ever made” (97) in marrying Nora. However, even with this escape, Howard still feels like he is running from the past, whether in terms of his actions on the ship, or his interaction with Stella. Tweed even says that Howard’s age as “three twenty-five-year-olds” (91), harkening back to the age that Howard would have been when he fought in the war. With reference to love, then, the Germans represent Howard’s fear of the past catching him, and the associated “what if?” of the life and love he could have lived.

The fire alarm on the ship can be similarly synthesized with reference to Howard’s WWI combat. Howard’s perceived discovery by Germans immediately follows the passage where Nora accosts him about Miriam Selby: “He accepted it [the Germans capturing him] without bitterness, even with some self-satisfaction. He had, after all, been right.” (95). In this passage Nora attacks Howard with his past and reveals the lack of *love* he feels towards her. Howard’s death by Germans, his martyrdom, is the death of his *love* to Miriam Selby. Further, it is the recognition by Howard that his marriage is not an act of *love* but was instead a “the smartest thing” that he ever did; it is not emotional or romantic but is simply the rational and clever decision. By showcasing the pragmatic foundation of their marriage, Wolff demonstrates that Howard and Nora are no more *in love* than the tormented Ron and promiscuous Stella, who are

supposedly *in love* because they are quite literally in the honeymoon of their relationship. For Carver, Nick and Laura who are in the similar “honeymoon phase” seem authentically *love* one another, whereas Wolff’s characters seem to have never had any “honeymoon” to start. For Howard, there is no clear boundary between the past and the present. A version of a successful marriage that lacks being *in love*, or *love*, exists. Wolff then defines that *true love* can exist without liking each other; although Nora seems to like Howard, Howard does not appear to like Nora. Yet their marriage, through its longevity, still represents *love*.

The parallels in “Beginners” and “Maiden Voyage” exemplify the contrast between a simple *love* predicated on liking one another, and a simple love that exists as a byproduct of longevity. Various exchanges between the characters in each of the stories are reminiscent of exchanges in the other, such as Nora’s speech during “Maiden Voyage.” Nora’s speech about her marriage seems like it is taken from a self-help book or a woman’s magazine: “Girls, don’t ever let yourselves get run down and go to pieces. A little exercise every day. Don’t ever let the sun set on a quarrel” (99). Nora gives advice to the women to stay attractive and resolve fights in the marriage, thus placing the impetus for success of a marriage on the woman and the woman’s role. Nora’s advice to not let the sun set on a quarrel is also a biblical allusion to Ephesians 4:26: “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger” (Christian Standard Bible, Ephesians 4:26) which is in a section of the New Testament which provides instructions about daily life. Such ideas about marriage have a longstanding position in literature. For example, in the early 1900s, Doctor Emma Walker writes in *Pretty Girl Papers*: “domestic joy, like every other coveted possession, must be worked for and earned [...] remember that your husband will depend upon you more than you will upon him” (Walker, 1905). Walker places the responsibility for marital success, and *love*, more on women than men. Further confirming the man’s place in marriage, Howard’s “advice” is that there is “nothing” (99) to staying in a relationship this long. Howard

does not seem to understand or value the duality of effort in marriage and instead is seemingly just being dragged along in it. Likewise, in “Beginners” Laura takes initiative in the relationship, and initiative in the love therein, “Well, Nick and I are in love,’ Laura said. ‘Aren’t we, Nick?’ She bumped my knee with her knee. ‘You’re supposed to say something now,’ she said” (183). Meanwhile, Nick, like Howard, seems to be more of a passive actor in his own life, a grass bending in the wind, as it may be. In both Laura and Nick’s relationship and in Howard and Nora’s relationship it seems that the wife *loves* the husband more, or at least, differently than the husband *loves* the wife.

A key difference in the two stories is that both characters in “Beginners” are divorced and remarried. During the 1950s period the divorce rate was about half of what it currently is, birth rates increased, and polls reflected that homes and families were the general source of happiness for both men and women (Coontz, 1997). During the 1970s divorce was gaining in popularity: the American divorce rate started climbing towards the end of the 1960s, with a peak in 1981 of 5.3 divorces per 1,000 people annually (Clarke, 1995). The divorces in “Beginners” imply that Herb, Terri, Nick, and Laura are not actually “beginners” (182) at *love*. Instead, Carver’s characters are eternally “beginners,” implying that they truly neither understand, nor can learn about love. In place of arguing divorce as a failure of *love*, Carver appears to argue that divorce, and a lapse of love, can be a part of mastering an abstract concept: *love*. For Carver, divorce is not inimical to *love*. The four characters in “Beginners” have all failed at love once or have succeeded in the sense that *love* is not meant to last. Carver does not discuss Nick and Laura’s divorces/previous marriages, however for each character it seems that his or her divorce is a way through which they have learned about *love*. Sonya Rudikoff’s 1973 commentary “Marriage and Household” synthesizes this view: “Most people who have serious thoughts about marriage would probably believe that some sort of love and caring was essential, as well

as intimacy, and some sort of responsibility. But permanence? This is no longer thought healthy or necessary” (Rudikoff, 1973). Thus, divorce could not harm *love*, instead, *love* could be intentionally temporary, with marriage being temporary as well. In the context of divorce, Howard and Nora then represent a very different couple. Howard and Nora would be from an era where divorce would be rare and generally frowned upon. Perhaps they might have wanted to divorce due to a lack of passion or adultery, but contemporary views on divorce generally would have discouraged them. With regards to divorce and the failure of first loves, Ron and Stella are then more similar to the characters in “Beginners” than they are to Howard and Nora. It could be possible that Ron might find *love* at some point in time, however Wolff seems to indicate that Ron will not find it with Stella.

The elderly couple in Herb’s story in “Beginners” expands the view of success of marriage to a broader success of *love* in general. The elderly couple has the same longevity that Wolff places importance on as a pillar of a “successful” marriage. However, unlike Howard and Nora, the couple in Herb’s story maintains passion, thus making them a more actualized presentation of marriage, and a higher ideal to aspire to. So, although Carver and Wolff do seem to present that successful marriages exist without the passion and pining for one another, perhaps they define a spectrum of success of *love* in marriage: many marriages are equal, but some are more equal than others. It seems that none of the couples in “Beginners” will ever reach the ideal of the marriage of the elderly couple: they have all been married and divorced, implying that they have missed their chances to have this one true, undying *love*. Similarly, it seems that the characters in “Maiden Voyage” will not reach this as well; even though Nora and Howard’s marriage has the same longevity as the elderly couple in “Beginners,” it lacks the pining, or by the definition of “Maiden Voyage,” the great love, and it additionally appears to lack the simple “enjoy[ing] each other’s company” (182) that exists in Nick and Laura’s marriage.

Love could just be longevity. Neither author seems to provide an explanation for why the ideal of the elderly couple is impossible for the characters, but it then seems that each author implies that love may exist in different levels, and even if something is not the ideal of *true love*, it is still *love*.

Both “Beginners” and “Maiden Voyage” are in conversation with each other with respect to the topic of love and a fundamental basis in the style of literary minimalism. “Maiden Voyage” presents two loves with seemingly different fates: Ron and Stella want to believe that their marriage will last, they will have children, and they will *love* each other, even though it seems likely that they will not. Howard and Nora have doubts about the *love* in their marriage, however it seems as if they *love* each other to some extent without realizing it, simply because they have stayed together for so long. In these characters, Wolff represents the idea that love both exists in places we do not realize and does not exist in places where we might think it does. Carver’s “Beginners” synthesizes the themes of “Maiden Voyage:” regardless where *love* exists and does not exist, more so it is that people are unable to understand *love* at all; *love* exists in different potentials, different shapes, and different amounts in different relationships, and we cannot combine it in one definition.

In essence then, *love* cannot be defined. In both “Maiden Voyage” and “Beginners,” *love* is not just achieving an everlasting passionate marriage, and it is greater than simply making a family. Howard and Nora’s relationship seems to imply that we find *love* without realizing that that is what we have achieved, indicating that maybe *love* is nothing more than staying together over 50 years. Nick and Laura share the similar, simpler trajectory of lasting marriage that Howard and Nora have, with a critical difference that Nick and Laura obviously “like one another” (182) whereas Howard may not like Nora. But the other characters in “Beginners” indicate that there may be more facets to *love* and more facets to relationships than just the

simple, undying foundation. The actual definition of love, for instance, could be Herb's definition of spiritual love: a spiritual pining for the souls of our partner. Most of us might never find this true spiritual passion, and as such we are eternally beginners at *love*. So, what *do* we talk about when we talk about *love*? Chiefly, Carver and Wolff suggest we do not know. We are all "beginners" at *love*. However, this amateurism does not prevent us from still having successful relationships, and finding *love*, whether it is *true love* or not. *Love*, in short, is like a road trip you get lost on. You'll know where to start, however the pathway to the destination is mystery. But at least if you're travelling with the right people, there will be a beautiful journey to experience along the way.

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