

A theme of the short story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," by Raymond Carver, could be summarized as: the nature of love is elusive and complex, and defies verbalization. Though the two couples, Mel and Terri, Nick and Laura, spend the afternoon discussing the topic of love—led mostly by Mel, who declares that he will tell the group what real love is, or at least provide an example—by the end, they do not seem any closer to defining what love is than when they started (176); and, indeed, the discussion seems to have left the couples more puzzled, and inquiry into the subject seems to have been proven futile as they all fall silent and become immobilized in the darkness at the end of the story (185). Carver employs certain literary devices to help reinforce this theme, in particular, the motif of unrealized intentions, as well as the invocation of a complex mood through the utilization of certain images.

Many times in the story, a character declares an intention (or there is implicit intention) of taking an action, and the action goes unrealized. This repetition of intended action/unrealized action supports the theme of the story that the nature of love is elusive—one can try to define it, but it will always defy definition. The most frequent example of this motif is the continual announcement of the plan to go out to dinner and the dramatic unfulfillment of that intention as the story's close finds all the characters sitting, unmoving in darkness. The occurrences of this particular instantiation of this motif become more frequent at the end of the story, helping to build towards a climax or, rather, anticlimax, and helping to drive home the theme. Mel says, "Let's finish this fucking gin. There's about enough left here for one shooter all around. Then let's go eat. Let's go to the new place," and "Maybe we'll just go eat. How does that sound?" (183-185); yet shortly after, Nick observes, "I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark" (185). Interestingly, none of the characters, per their immobilization, seem to have clear awareness of the meaning of what they just experienced; the theme is there for the reader's edification, emphasized and facilitated by the characters' stillness.

This motif appears in somewhat lighter form when the sun starts setting and the light starts vanishing from the room, and yet "nobody made a move to get up from the table to turn on the overhead light" (183). The inability of characters to move becomes more overt at the end of the story as Terri says, "I'll put out some cheese and crackers," and Nick observes, "Terri just sat there. She did not get up to get anything" (185). A variation of this motif is evidenced in the number of times Mel is stymied—either by being interrupted or interrupting himself—and prevented from going forward with his story about the elderly couple, which figuratively points up his inability to articulate the nature of love. He interrupts himself twice (176-178); Terri interrupts twice (178, 179); and twice he needs to be encouraged to continue by Laura and Terri (182). Additionally, at the end, as another variation of this motif, Mel suddenly desires to talk to his kids: "I think I want to call my kids," Mel said. "Is that okay with everybody? I'll call my kids" (184). But then, soon after, seemingly without reason, changes his mind: "Maybe I won't call the kids, after all. Maybe it isn't such a hot idea" (185).

In addition to using motif, Carver also uses mood to further the story's theme. Carver maintains a complex tone throughout the story, and perhaps even ratchets it up at the end with explicit reference to depression, which helps underline the exhaustion Mel feels in his attempt to comprehend and explain the concept of love, as well as the larger thematic point that attempting such comprehension and explanation inevitably will result in failure and exhaustion:

"He's depressed," Terri said, "Mel, why don't you take a pill?"

Mel shook his head. "I've taken everything there is."

"We all need a pill now and then," I said.

"Some people are born needing them," Terri said. (page 184)

The menace and violence that has been part of the mood is retained through to the end, as Mel, soon after he finishes his story about the elderly couple's love for each other, reveals that every day he wishes death upon his ex-wife, Marjorie: "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 by a swarm of fucking bees" (184). However, the mood is not solely one of menace and violence; humor, even if a bit dark, is also still part of the mood and plays a role in the violence, as Mel rather comically simulates bees attacking Marjorie: "Bzzzzzz," Mel said, turning his fingers into bees and buzzing them at Terri's throat" (184). Upon violence, menace, and comedy, love is preserved as a component of the mood—Mel humorously describes dressing up like a beekeeper and then making sure his kids wouldn't be in the house when he would attempt to murder their mother: "Sometimes I think I'll go up there dressed like a beekeeper. You know, that hat that's like a helmet with the plate that comes down over your face, the big gloves, and the padded coat? I'll knock on the door and let loose a hive of bees in the house. But first I'd make sure the kids were out, of course" (185). The complex mood these images and ideas produce complement the theme as it too is complex and resists simple parsing and understanding. The complex mood keeps the reader engaged and emotionally prepares her to begin interpreting the meaning of the text—that the concept of love seemingly contains instances of violence and menace that have to somehow be included in an accounting of love; and, by that fact, the nature of love is confusing and complex. And, thus, the messy feelings and ideas are pointed up of what we talk about when we talk about love.