

THE REASONS FOR MISINTERPRETATION OF MINIMALISM AND THE
REPRESENTATIONS IT TAKES IN RAYMOND CARVER'S AND AMY HEMPEL'S
WORKS

By

Inga Vatinyan

Presented to the
Department of English & Communications
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

American University of Armenia
Yerevan, Armenia

May 5, 2017

Introduction

Literature and writing are two of the most powerful means of transferring information. Both of them adapt to every time period, tackling the issues of that specific span. They have the power to inform and influence people's viewpoints. Thanks to literature and writing, nearly nothing remains in the shadow of ignorance. Writers inform people about a number of problems that are carefully hidden in societies. The methods of transferring information— writing styles, vary from one author to another. Each author dedicates himself/herself to a certain movement or creates his/her own version of it, in order to be able to add something new to the already discussed ideas. Sometimes, several movements, styles and authors following those movements, remain misunderstood. The most prominent example of such a matter is literary minimalism, which has been misinterpreted for decades.

Being drastically different from the writing styles that people are used to, literary minimalism frequently struggles with the issue of being misread. Even though now this issue seems to be resolved, a certain division of readers and scholars still does not approve of minimalism, finding it too dry and abrupt.

For the same reason of being misunderstood, it is difficult to find a definition that will fully describe the essence of minimalism. Many writers and scholars have defined minimalism according to their own perceptions of it. However, not all of the descriptions match the real function of minimalism. Moreover, the majority of those descriptions simply leave out an important piece of information and characteristics about the style.

Minimalism is usually perceived as a style which does not provide necessary information to the reader. However, the simplistic structure of minimalism provides the reader with more

freedom in formulating a wider perception of the happenings. The message is condensed through use of specific writing techniques. Sometimes it is hidden between the lines or behind the words. Robert Clark (2014), who will be discussed in more detail below, supports this argument. He finds that the minimalistic approach gives the reader a chance to find their own interpretations of the text. Lack of details also gives them an opportunity to put their imagination at work and create their own world within the story. In minimalist writings, a single word may be a condensation of a whole world of descriptions and clarifications. Minimalism is also interesting to experiment with.

Every writer leaves his/her own fingerprint on the style, by adopting it and transforming it into something different. To prove the hidden depth of minimalist writing and to explore the transformation of minimalism from one writer to another, this capstone will look at various writing techniques used in minimalism, analyzing the works of Raymond Carver and Amy Hempel. The various technical details about writing in a minimalistic style would not be in existence if their ‘collaboration’ was not well thought out in terms of structuring.

Language, being the means of communication, both assists the development of texts and hinders it. Francine Prose (2006) in her book “Reading like a Writer” refers to the importance of every particle of writing. She believes that a text is a chain, comprised of many important units. Each unit is crucial for the chain to be firm. Thus, her statement carries out the meaning that if considering the physical essence of a text, each letter is important for a word, just like a word for a sentence, a sentence for a paragraph, and a paragraph for a text. While in case of considering the meaning of the text, the narration style, and character creation appear to be the main basis. Thus, when analyzing an actual writing one should keep these points in mind in order to come up with a proper thorough analysis.

Literature Review

Literary minimalism is a misunderstood writing style. It is thought to represent dry writing, where adjectives and adverbs are rarely at use and significant details are left out. This is one true, but incomplete definition of minimalism. Robert C. Clark in his book *American Literary Minimalism* (2014) thoroughly examines the essence of minimalism. Starting from its origins, Clark demonstrates the evolution of minimalism in literature. He believes that the previously mentioned characteristics of this stylistic movement are on the surface of minimalist literature. The author states that those generalized features of minimalism allow the writer to concentrate more on details, in order to be able to eliminate them in a logical manner. This style gives the reader a chance to be fully engaged in the story, living it on their own, not following a path drawn by the author. Clark also explores the tools that serve as substitutes for details in minimalistic writings. Discussing works of several prominent minimalist writers, Clark finds that “The effectiveness of a minimalist story depends upon the successful use of three central techniques: allusion, implication, and efficiency. In order to create fiction that achieves thematic and linguistic gravity, authors working within the mode are economical in their use of language. Every word matters” (Clark, 2014). Similarly to minimalism, the short story, as a genre of writing, has a history of being underestimated and misinterpreted.

As the name suggests, short stories are concise. In short stories, information is condensed and properly distributed between a few pages. Thus, here also, the line between the important and unimportant is blurred. To make the effort more manageable, many writers include two to four characters in their stories. Just like in minimalist writing, in short stories writers do an extremely careful job of picking and deleting details that they consider unnecessary. For this exact purpose, both the style and the genre are often misinterpreted. Phil Greaney (2005), in his

work “Less is More: Literary Minimalism in American Short Story – Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver and Frederick Barthelme” defines minimalism. He thoroughly examines the features of minimalism, citing prominent critics such as Cynthia J. Hallet. Greaney builds on Hallet’s argument, according to which the only reason for the underestimation of minimalist short stories is a lack of knowledge about their essence. The author claims that one has to be willing to dig and find narrative details that are intentionally left out. Minimalist short stories open up a new reality for the reader, which is practical and on point. Scenes imply that there is more to discover in every sentence. Minimalist short story writers put great effort to carefully construct the sentences and gaps, so that the reader has the chance to tie the beginning of the story to its end. This intriguing experience is marked as unnecessarily simple by many literary critics. Hallet states, “Generally in such texts, distraction and clutter are stripped from the depiction of human commerce until the reader encounters the whole of society reflected in slivers of individual experience. Here, the unstated is present as a cogent force” (Hallet, 1996).

Scholars and critics have been arguing about Carver’s minimalism for years. Some of them have found that Carver is not entirely a minimalist writer. However, at some point, these debates stopped. He was marked to be an established minimalist. More recent studies suggest that the stylistic connection between literary Impressionism and literary minimalism is evident in Carver’s writings. Robert C. Clark in his “Keeping the Reader in the House: American Minimalism, Literary Impressionism, and Raymond Carver's “Cathedral”” (2012) claims that minimalism emerges from Impressionism. Both have the same technique of conceiving details, thus giving the reader room for thinking. He sees both in Carver’s *Cathedral*. Here, Carver reveals only half of the information the reader needs to easily follow the story. By doing so, however, he manages to “keep the reader in the house”. His writing is full of suggestions that the

reader is free to notice, understand and build up on. Carver intentionally creates protagonists who are either not able, or are not willing to think much. Their actions describe their characteristics, so the writer does not need to expand on that specifically. Every detail in minimalist stories is thought out, since the format and style gives the writer only one chance to express his/her ideas. Clark states “Minimalist stories often require readers to “assemble” images and allusions in order to make a coherent, complete narrative... The reportorial nature of the mode is perhaps the reason some critics find it to be nihilistic or morally neutral. Because authors and narrators tend to be self-effacing, intrusiveness and exposition are rare. Thoughts and emotions are implied rather than told, so there are rarely explanatory passages in which protagonists contemplate what is happening to them” (Clark, 2012). Apparently, that is the reason for criticism on Carver and other minimalist writers. As in the previously discussed issue with short story criticism, here also the main argument is shallowness of writings, which puts a story in a form difficult to follow. For the purpose of keeping the form but making the story easy to follow, several writers, including Carver, developed specific strategies of storytelling.

Storytelling, both oral and written, is another influential aspect of discourse. If done properly, it has power over a person’s memory and perception. In a form of a story, any information becomes more memorable and comprehensible. The same message can be perceived in two drastically different ways, depending on the way it is introduced to the listener/reader. In case of being presented under the cover of a simplistic and practical story, any message can become sticky. Creating a world, similar to the one the reader is living in, creates the ground for a story to be memorized and retold. Charles E. May in his article “Do You See What I'm Saying?": The Inadequacy of Explanation and the Uses of Story in the Short Fiction of Raymond Carver” (2001), discusses the above mentioned topic in detail. Starting off with a story from

Carver's life, he prepares the reader for the further analysis of Carver's strategies of storytelling. He reflects on Carver's technique of creating an actual storytelling scene inside his short stories. This technique is believed to support the main feature of minimalism, which is making the reader see the details without explaining anything. May also notices that Carver's "...stories frequently focus on characters who express their frustration with either their to tell or their listener's inability to understand" (May, 2001). This technique somehow justifies the absence of details. It gives room for the narration to reveal itself. The writer, thus, makes his short space for description and explanation equal to that of the protagonist's. This approach adds reason to minimalist technique, creating a story constructed of intrigue and anticipation. May believes that a Minimalist "...storyteller says he wants someone to see what he is saying, he does not mean merely the surface detail, but rather how the detail creates a meaningful pattern" (May, 2001). This approach, however, is not the only one. Many critics judge Carver's work, marking it as simplistic and empty.

To find out the real essence of Carver's writing, one needs to be familiar with both positive and negative opinions about his narration. As mentioned before, the concept of shallowness was applied to minimalism. Thus, it was viewed as underestimation, which put the authors in frames of limitation. For that reason, many writers, including Carver, denied being minimalists. Regardless of this fact, many thinkers such as John Barth, Graham Clarke and Ihab Hassan view Carver as a minimalist. Their interpretations, however, mostly vary from each other. Michael Trussler in his work "The Narrowed Voice: Minimalism and Raymond Carver" (1994) provides the reader with his own interpretation of Carver's writing, commenting on some of the ideas of those critics. Mentioning Carver's own negative opinion towards being marked as a minimalist, Trussler introduces various interpretations that the term was given back then.

Several specific writing techniques are brought up in his discussions about Carver's writing. Those discussions result in a conclusion where Carver's narrative discourse is claimed to be exclusive. Trussler states "Perpetually threatening to erode the position of its practitioners simultaneously with the necessity of their engaging in it, narrative involves separation rather than recovery... What draws us as readers to Carver's work, what is so compelling in our dialogue with the texts, is the manner in which they manifest a dialectical relationship between the unsaid and unspoken" (Trussler, 1994). Carver is a well-analyzed writer, which makes it easier for a reader to comprehend his ideas. To understand more recent minimalists, however, the reader needs to have certain background not only on minimalism, but also on the overall styles and ideas of those authors.

Amy Hempel, on the other hand, is not well-analyzed. The reader can barely find one scholarly analysis of her work. This creates a problem in terms of understanding the writer's views generally, before reading her minimalist stories. Patricia Vigderman's article "Almost No Center" (1999) is, then, an alternative source for learning about another female minimalist writer of the same time period – Davis, and trying to apply several details to the writing of Hempel. Here, the discussion of three writings by Davis gives the reader a general overview of her principles of writing. Along with that, the author reflects on Davis' definitions of translation and the short story. Davis is different and stands out with her way of thinking and writing. She is a master in translating the events of life into the language of fiction, using specific techniques to make her work more engaging and appealing. As the representatives of the same time period, Hempel and Davis must have some of these features in common. Thus, for an original analysis, such a comparative approach is one of the most acceptable alternatives.

To have a background on writing techniques and details is necessary for correct interpretation of a text while reading. However, merely learning a few minor techniques will not suffice for “reading like a writer” or for writing. Reading like a writer is the first step to becoming a writer, since close reading adjusts one’s way of thinking to that of the writer’s. In her book *Reading like a Writer: A Guide for People who Love Books and for those who Want to Write Them* (2006), Prose dedicates chapters to examining words, sentences, paragraphs, narration, characterization, dialogues and details in texts. She believes that every author has his/her own approach, however the basis of their techniques are mostly the same. Every word has its role in a sentence, just like the sentence has its specific mission in a paragraph. All of these together create the style of the narration, which is then spiced up with characterization, dialogues and details. Each aspect is essential for a reader/writer, especially for a beginner. “In the ongoing process of becoming a writer, I read and reread the authors I most loved. I read for pleasure, first, but also more analytically, conscious of style, of diction, of how sentences were formed and information was being conveyed, how the writer was structuring a plot, creating characters, employing detail and dialogue” (2006) she mentions.

To be able to read and write minimalist stories, one needs to digest this information, to own these techniques and to combine their analytical skills with their background on minimalism and writing. By doing so, each individual will be able to properly interpret minimalism and change the somewhat negative public opinion about it.

Research Questions and Methodology

1. How do limitations placed by literary minimalism widen the reader’s framework of perception of a text, while logically narrowing down the commonly used techniques of idea transfer?

2. Is it possible to define minimalism?

3. What techniques are used in works of famous minimalists Raymond Carver and Amy Hempel to engage the reader into the process of storytelling and comprehension of their texts?

4. How does each author adjust those common techniques to their own storytelling style, while preserving the minimalist nature of their writings?

For defining the concept of minimalism three prominent minimalist writers Carver and Hempel were chosen to be analyzed. There are several reasons for choosing them over other authors. Raymond Carver, being the most discussed minimalist author, is the richest source for discovering the nature of minimalism. The various contradictory views on his writings give this research a chance to dig deeper into the concept of minimalism and its representations in literature. Amy Hempel was chosen for being recent/contemporary and unique in her style of expression. Choosing her out of all the contemporary minimalist writers was a challenge which this research is to overcome. While there are several analyses on Lydia Davis (another minimalist contemporary author), there is almost nothing written about Hempel's works, which allows this research to expand on her style and technique, thus starting a new chapter in the analysis of literary minimalism.

Research Findings and Analysis

Defining Minimalism

Minimalism is a term, which has been applied to various aspects of not only art, but also life in general. Michael Trussler (1994) finds that everything was once given a minimalist definition.

As for the meaning that is implied when using the term, he cannot be definite. The term is used

both for praising and for devaluing anything it is applied to. It is possible for an artwork to be labeled as minimalist in order to dismiss it. There is an equal possibility of appreciating a masterpiece by examining it under a minimalist scope.

Facing difficulties while defining minimalism many thinkers, such as Barthes, tried to put it in contrast with maximalism. By doing so, they hoped to get a somewhat clear understanding of what the real characteristics of minimalism are. Barthes, unlike many other critics, finds that minimalism is beautiful if it is correctly applied to the text. He makes the same statement about maximalism, meaning that his measure of the importance or unimportance of both is equal.

Following the logic, literary minimalism is another vague term which can be applied to any type of short text. However, taking into consideration Trussler's axiom "to name is to know", it can be concluded that if there is a term, then there is a clear definition behind it.

According to Greaney's research on literary minimalism, "Hallett, argues that minimalism develops and extends the tendency in short fiction towards reduction, omission and suggestion". Minimalist authors reduce the information, replacing it with omission and suggestion. By doing so, it opens up new dimensions for the reader to improvise and to create their own storylines within the given measures

As an attempt to find a clear definition, Robert Clark (2014) in his book *American Literary Minimalism* reflects on several definitions of minimalism. Among the earliest formulations of the role and function of minimalism is found in Frederick R. Karl's *American Fictions 1940-1980*. He believes that in minimalist literature "The author brings us close to boredom, withdrawal, rejection of the work itself. Further, minimalist fiction is nearly always based on a pessimistic view of life, where all the normal goals or controls no longer

obtain”. Alongside with his skeptical approach towards minimalism, Karl suggests that omission is an important detail that a minimalist work should have in order to create the abstract reality, in the setting of which the actual story would appear more interesting to the reader.

Karl’s idea regarding the pessimistic nature of minimalism is drawn from the real-life experiences that the style usually depicts. Writing and any other branch of art is most commonly used for voicing an issue. Thus, in a minimalist approach, the first impression of each story may be pessimistic. However, that does not give basis for sorting minimalism as a pessimistic movement, since every story has culmination to it. Moreover, every person is free to broaden the narrow information provided in a minimalist text and to create a setting that matches their own preferences.

Distancing himself from Karl, Kim Herzinger stated that the style keeps evolving. At some point, his statements gave room for reconsideration of the name of the movement. Dedicated to his own righteousness, Herzinger collected a long list of possible definitions/names for minimalism. His list included phrases such as White Trash Fiction, Dirty Realism, Around-the-house-and-in-the-yard Fiction, Post-Alcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism. Clark mentions that almost all of them were inapplicable due to being “narrowly applicable to individual or small groups of writers”.

The existence of these and other definitions of minimalism still leave space for further contemplations. Still, in order to strictly define minimalism, the objective is to find the crossing point of the most common definitions and to see if it applies to the overall nature of minimalist texts.

One interesting formulation of the basics of minimalism, also found in Clark's book, is that of Whitney Hallett's. She claims, "...the most identifiable of the varied features of minimalist short fiction include: a blunt, lean, apparently uncomplicated prose; more dialogue than exposition with no evident auctorial intrusion, and little, if any, narratorial intrusion; non-heroic characters who resemble everyday people doing everyday things; a sense that all "action" either appears to have occurred a while ago, or occurred just moments before the story began, or occurs later "offstage," that is, not within the moments of the story".

Roots of Minimalism

To find the exact definition of minimalism, it is also necessary to dig deeper into the roots of the style. Clark (2012) tried to identify the origins of minimalism. Finding out about the process of its development is one of the few methods to get an overall understanding of the way minimalism functions in literature and writing.

James Dishon McDermott, John Barth and Hallett find that minimalism was established in 1950s, but its actual history starts from the late 19th century. Several works from 1890s share similar style and writing techniques with famous minimalists Carver and Ernest Hemingway. One of those similarities is imagism, which is a distinctive characteristic of literary impressionism. Imagism is about writing poetry in free verse, by conveying the author's ideas through clear images. As defined by an impressionist writer Hamlin Garland, the fundamental principle of creating impressionist art is to let the artwork speak for itself, as a whole entity, leaving room for the viewer/reader to come up with their own interpretations. Accordingly, the same idea lies behind minimalist art and literature. The author does not explicate, assess or judge

anything. This implies extreme attention towards picking the proper words, as well as putting them in certain, well thought out order.

Carver's *Cathedral* (1983) is a vivid illustration of the mentioned connection between minimalism and impressionism. Even though the story is about human senses, it does not give any exact description of any of those senses at work. In case of viewing the text with readiness to grasp the hints given by the narrator and to comprehend the main idea, the reader gets a full understanding of the situation. Carver rarely gives any straight-forward descriptions about the thoughts of the protagonist about the happenings. Neither does the narrator reveal his characteristics. As Clark puts it, here "Thoughts and emotions are implied rather than told..." as in most of the minimalist and impressionist writings. Facing the similarities between these two styles, it is reasonable to consider this theory a reliable one. To further build up on the idea, it is significant to develop firm understanding of the components of minimalist texts.

Features of Minimalism: Efficiency, Implication, Allusion

Minimalism seems to be an open form of writing, which allows the reader to say or leave out as much of information as they want. However, the simplistic structure of minimalism imposes strictness upon the writings. As Trussler (1994) points out, minimalist writers are left with less room for expression than non-minimalists. The style dictates almost no use of adjectives and adverbs, which directly affects the space that the author is given to express his/her ideas. Thus, in minimalist writings every word is well thought out. Words and phrases are in a competition with each other. The writer has to pick the one that fully conveys the meaning he/she intends to convey. According to Clark, trying to come up with an appealing writing, also following the

above mentioned restrictions, minimalists developed a complex of features that have to be included in their writings.

Accordingly, the three most prominent features that differentiate minimalism from other movements are: efficiency, implication and allusion. All three of these features guide the challenging word choice/phrasing of minimalist authors.

Efficiency: The main fact that makes minimalist writings efficient is that the absence of certain information does not initiate confusion but it triggers a desire to further investigate the situation, depicted in the story. Clark believes that efficiency is comprised of a proper balance between “thematic and linguistic gravity” and implication. By “thematic and linguistic gravity” the author means the social class and the setting that the story represents. Minimalist writings are mostly about common people, their problems, thoughts, and lives in general. Thus, the language of the dialogues is accordingly simple and comprehensive. This puts any story into a setting, where the readers easily find themselves and turn the experiences of the characters into their own experiences.

In Carver’s *Cathedral*, efficiency is evident. Just like every minimalist piece of literature, his writing is full of suggestions that the reader is free to notice, understand and build up on. Carver intentionally creates protagonists who are either not able, or are not willing to think much. Their actions speak for their characteristics. Thus, the author does not need to describe the character in detail. Every minor point in his stories is thought out, since the format and style gives the writer little space to express his/her ideas.

In *Cathedral*, the setting is implied to be a very casual one. The reader does not get any direct descriptions of the location and the situation. The only pathway to the world of *Cathedral*

lies through the thoughts of the narrator. Minor details, such as “I turned off the TV. I finished my drink, rinsed the glass, dried my hands. Then I went to the door” put the story in a relatable setting. This sequence of actions is familiar to every person. Thus, reading such lines people tend to start applying the situation to their own life. It turns them into one of the spectator characters of the story, who has the right to interpret and guide the storyline from the inside.

Moreover, Carver adds to the reader’s sensation of familiarity by including the awkwardness of daily life encounters. He does that, again, using the narrators thoughts. “I started to say something about the old sofa. I’d liked that old sofa. But I didn’t say anything. Then I wanted to say something else, small-talk, about the scenic ride along the Hudson”. This line fully conveys the uncomfortable situation the characters are in. In addition, the author peppers up these experiences with similarly stylized conversations that fully convey the attitudes of every character. ““Did you have a good train ride?” I said. “Which side of the train did you sit on, by the way?” “What a question, which side!” my wife said. “What’s it matter which side?” she said. “I just asked,” I said. “Right side,” the blind man said””. This little talk tells the reader about the wife’s attitude towards her husband, her protective predisposition towards the blind man and the blind man’s neutral approach to the narrator’s ironic awkwardness.

In Hempel’s (2010) texts a similar tendency is noted. When looking at her famous *In the Cemetery Where Al Johnson is Buried* one can notice the use of efficiency throughout the whole text. In this story, the stream-of-consciousness style of writing creates the necessary base for this tool to function. As the story goes, the reader witnesses the unknown narrator explore, realize, deny, and mock things. This is a set of psychological responses that every person gives to an undesirable situation. By using efficiency, Hempel puts the readers into the narrator’s mind, making them think with her and share the overall experience. “She introduces me to a nurse as

the Best Friend. The impersonal article is more intimate". Here the narrator tries to deal with the partial loss of her friend. "It tells me they are more intimate the nurse and my friend". A situation anyone can find themselves in. Then she tries to overcome that unpleasant thought, using the common technique of distraction. "I was telling her we used to drink Canada Dry ginger ale and pretend we were in Canada." "That's how dumb we were," I say. "You could be sisters," the nurse says". Hempel's stories are full of such phrases and sentences that create a setting where the reader fits in and contributes to the story.

Implication: To make the happenings more realistic for the readers, minimalist authors make their writing suggestive, which implies low level of intrusiveness and exposition. In being so, the events seem more real to the readers. Similar to the real life, people do not get details about anything. No information is directly provided to them. They have to put details together, construct their own impression and base the rest of the reading experience on that assumption. Here, the second feature of minimalist writings steps in.

From the very beginning of Cathedral, the reader finds out about an unknown man who is coming to visit the protagonist's wife. The first and only characteristic of that man is the fact that he is blind. "This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night." Directly mentioning his blindness is not a mere characteristic of a person. Later in the story it turns out to be the main particle of the puzzle that the reader needs to put together. Blindness, here, is the foundation upon which the reader needs to build to learn about each left out description. The protagonist focuses on the character's blindness, not even understanding the reason of that concentration.

He also accentuates that his wife and Robert record tapes and share secrets. Combining these two particles, the reader can build the image of the protagonist's insecurities. Not having

an emotional connection with his wife himself, he tries to diminish the humane value of Robert focusing on the physical advantage that he has over the blind man. This factor fully expresses the protagonist's worldview, in terms of sensual openness, morality and self-esteem, while keeping away from direct explanations. Here, characterization is done through implications. All of the above mentioned traits of the protagonist's character reveal themselves in a subtle and gradual manner.

In Hempel's story as well, implications function similarly. The characters are not introduced to the reader. The necessary hints about their background come forward as they think, speak, and communicate. The reader then is free to put them together and make his/her own image of the past and present of the story. The narrator partially exposes herself and her friend as she thinks. Being extremely realistic and human, the staging of her thoughts makes the story sticky. Thus, the implications work as sounds in a musical composition. In minimalist stories like this, the chords (bases) are provided. The composition will be pleasant to the ear as long as you shift the notes and sounds within the limits of those chords. The notes, here are the details such as the narrator leaving her friend for a while, then forever, and subconsciously blaming the friend for "wanting her life". Here, the reader is free to opionate based on these details and to create many different compositions – blaming the narrator, sympathizing with the narrator, etc. With each choice the story will take up a whole different route, according to the preferences and needs of each reader.

Allusion: Just like implication, allusion functions to make a compensation for limited exposition. It adds depth to the events that otherwise might seem irrelevant or incomplete. Amy Hempel is among the minimalist writers that strictly follow the correct placement of allusion in the text. Calculating every detail, Hempel and other authors pick names, phrases, and places that

are the dearest to the readers. Through allusion, they reach to a certain level of trust with the reader, which itself is a proof of efficiency. Thus, every single feature of minimalist writing matters in the system. They are interrelated, inseparable, and sometimes even interchangeable in the function.

Continuing with the example of “In the Cemetery Where Al Johnson is Buried”, it is fair to note that allusions are there from the very beginning of the story. The story is put in the Southern California setting, which carries a number of meanings behind it. The fact of the hospital being near Hollywood lets the imagination of the reader function. Some may connect this to the idea that the characters of the story were being watched. To support this suggestion of the reader, the narrator mentions “I had my audience”. Here also, the sentence is not followed with explanations. The reader is free to apply it to any context and to decide on the further flow of the story.

Besides several major allusions such as the one discussed, there are a number of minor one, such as references to Canada Dry ginger ale, Kuber-Ross, Kansas, and Ocean View. Together with the previously mentioned one, they create a strong construction of allusions, which guides each reader through the storyline in different ways. In Carver’s works, the emphasis is put on frequent use of minor allusions rather than major ones.

In “Cathedral” allusions mostly go together with symbolism. Throughout the story, the reader encounters names such as “Air Force base in Alabama”, McConnel, McGuire, Sacramento, Philippines and Alaska. These names serve as mere allusions to create a practical setting in the minds of the readers. With the listing of each set of countries, the reader gets an overall understanding of the situation. It also assists the reader in catching the tone and attitude

of the protagonist towards the happenings. On the other side, several allusions such as the coin that Robert owns, or the tapes, TV, and the cathedral have a note of symbolism in themselves. In this symbolist touch, the reader gets to feel the connection between the real world and the world where the story takes place. Trussler mentions that by picking extremely casual objects and by concentrating the reader's attention on them through symbolism, Carver reaches his aim of making the reader apply the story to their life. All of those points together make the text efficient in every possible aspect.

Storytelling

For guaranteeing the successful maintenance and coexistence of all of the previously mentioned components, the text needs a message, which is delivered to the reader in a clear manner. In minimalism, however, the manner of communication is not very clear. Information is not as easily accessible as the average reader would prefer it to be. The form of the writing, in this case, may assist minimalist writers to make their idea more comprehensible. Charles May (2001) believes that in order to make the information sticky, one should create a story which is relatable. To make a story relatable, one should put it in a casual setting. For this purpose, many authors use the technique of telling a story within the story.

For minimalists especially, this technique works perfectly, since in their stories they often choose to use miscommunication as a key tool for re-interpretation of any matter. It allows the author to incorporate side opinion, by avoiding intrusion and violation of the character's privacy. The opinion is inseminated in the story through an optional third party, who is the 'audience' of the story. Just like in reality, a story finds itself in a casual conversation, where one side (the protagonist) tells the other side (an optional character) about something and expects to be

understood. The participant of the conversation, most commonly, does not understand the protagonist's point of view, suggesting his/her own approach or judgment. Thus, this technique gives more room for subtle additional explanation and incorporation of side opinion.

According to May, Carver had a habit of listening to other people's stories with great interest and participation. "One of the most familiar images of Raymond Carver recalled by his friends and acquaintances is his participation in storytelling exchanges and his wonder at the mystery of story. Describing Carver's love of telling and listening to stories, Stephen Dobyns says Carver would scratch his head and lean forward with his elbows on his knees and say, 'You know, I remember a funny thing'. And when someone else told a story, says Dobyns, Carver would 'burst forth with oddly archaic interjections such as "you don't say" and "think of that". Then he would shake his head and look around in amazement". By doing so, Carver most probably applied his daily life experience to that of the reader's. In case of listening to a casual story in a daily setting, he was able to memorize and retell it. Accordingly, he designed his stories in a similar manner— having two people sitting and gossiping near the kitchen table, or while watching TV, etc.

Carver is not the only one to adopt the tendency of using this technique. At some point it became quite widespread. May mentions that it is frequently encountered in short stories, as well as in most of the minimalist stories. The reason is that short stories and minimalist writings have less room for expansion and description. They keep the reader in anticipation, searching for a reason or solution between the lines. Creating this aesthetic pattern assists the reader to perceive the story, as the narration reveals itself. It imprints the pictorial side of the story into the reader's mind, thus making the idea sticky (easily memorized and retold).

Authors about Being Classified as Minimalists

As a term, minimalism was misunderstood and underestimated not only by non-minimalists, but also by many minimalist authors. Most of the very first minimalist writers were not sure about their own reactions to the new label they were given. Since for more than the half of the society 'minimalism' had a negative connotation, many authors were confused. They did not know what that term meant, as well as they could not tell if being called a minimalist was a sign of appreciation or vice versa.

In his written discussion about minimalism, Robert Clark (2012) mentions several direct opinions of writers. In an interview in 2011, Anne Beattie is asked to describe her feelings about being classified as a minimalist. Her very first phrase is "none of us have ever known what that means". This response once again underlines the vague state that minimalism is in. As Beattie continues, she gives her own definition to minimalism, which is "minimalism resides in certain omissions". By that, the author implies that the essence of minimalism is in its faultiness. Omissions may include lack of clear descriptions, direct narration or any other specificity of minimalism. Those details are the pillars that keep minimalist literature steady.

Raymond Carver, on his turn, was strictly against being classified as anything, especially as a minimalist. According to Trussler (1994) he considered this to be a 'tag' which put various incomparable authors under one generalization. Carver accepted that most of his works follow the idea that 'less is more'. However, in doing so, he still refused to accept any type of classification. After a while of contemplation, he partially adopted his 'tag' of a minimalist.

Amy Hempel did not directly react to being called a minimalist author. However, in her interview with BOMB, she stated that every loss is acceptable for her if it is compensated.

Keeping in mind that most of her writings follow this idea, it is safe to assume that she applies that concept to her stories as well. Thus, minimalism can be interpreted as a sequence of losses (senses, descriptions, events, direct narration) that are compensated by the author's implications, as well as by the openness of the reader to revelations.

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it is fair to conclude that minimalism does widen the scope of perception of the readers, by narrowing down the amount of overall information. No straightforward details or descriptions are provided to the readers. They are free to interpret the minimal facts and to read between the lines to formulate their attitude towards the story. Moreover, by giving the stories a casual and relatable setting, the minimalist authors, including Carver and Hempel, help the reader feel as the major part of the story. Thus, each person reading the text considers himself/herself eligible for making theoretical adjustments in the further development of the content. Even though, there seems to be little space for improvisation for the writer, the reader has freedom of input.

Examining the roots and the pre-existing definitions of minimalism, as well as conducting my own analysis of the style, I got assured that minimalism can be defined. In minimalism less is more, since regardless of the seeming existence of narrow borders around the text, the reader has the freedom to make their own adjustments to the storyline, using the space and opportunities for creative expression, hidden between the lines.

The three main tools to create a worthy minimalist story are efficiency, implication, and allusion. Each of these tools play an essential role in making the stories sticky and comprehensible. If not for these components, the negative opinions about minimalism would be

true. Minimalist writings would be dry and abrupt, without any insight. However, with the incorporation of efficiency, implication, and allusion, minimalist writers make their writings relatable, open to improvisation, and exceptional in their nature.

Discussing the two famous works of prominent minimalist writers Carver and Hempel, it became clear that their writings have all of the necessary components of minimalist texts. They adjust the use of those tools to their own perceptions and styles, thus making their stories unique and different.

To conclude, it can be stated that minimalism is one of the most valuable styles of writing. In the analysis conducted in the previous pages of the research, it was proven that minimalism is equally, if not more, saturated as the other styles of writing. Thus, it is important to have proper understanding of the style to be able to meaningfully interpret the texts.

Works Cited

- Carver, R. (1983). *Cathedral*. Knopf.
- Clark, R. C. (2012). Keeping the Reader in the House: American Minimalism, Literary Impressionism, and Raymond Carver's "Cathedral". *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36(1), 104-118.
- Clark, R. C. (2014). *American Literary Minimalism*. Tuscaloosa: The University Alabama Press.
- Greaney Ph. (2005). *Less is More: Literary Minimalism in American Short Story – Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver and Frederick Barthelme*. Open University.
- Hempel, A. (2010). *In the Cemetery Where Al Johnson is Buried*. Fictionout.

- May, C. E. (2001). 'Do You See What I'm Saying?': The Inadequacy of Explanation and the Uses of Story in the Short Fiction of Raymond Carver. *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 31, 39.
- Prose, F. (2006). *Reading like a Writer: A Guide for People who Love Books and for those who Want to Write Them*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Trussler, M. (1994). The Narrowed Voice: Minimalism and Raymond Carver. *Newberry, S.C.* 31 (1). 23-37.
- Vigderman, P. (1999). Review: Almost No Center. *Kenyon College*. 21 (2). 152-159.

Annotated Bibliography

1. Clark, R. C. (2012). Keeping the Reader in the House: American Minimalism, Literary Impressionism, and Raymond Carver's "Cathedral". *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36(1), 104-118.

This article discusses the roots of Literary Minimalism. The main idea behind it is that the concept of minimalism cannot be fully comprehended, unless one has a full knowledge of its history. Clark's theory implies that literary impressionism was the initiating force for minimalism. The author draws parallels between Impressionists and Raymond Carver. More specifically, he reflects on the essence of Carver's short story *Cathedral*, claiming that it is an embodiment of the merge between impressionism and minimalism. The author backs up his arguments with nearly line by line analysis of the story.

This unique approach towards Carver's writing style was of use for my capstone. I conducted my own thorough analysis, after which tried to apply some of Clark's ideas to my findings. Depending on the perspective that formulated throughout the process of analysis and

further research, I decided if this approach is similar to mine or not. If not, eagerly used it as a contradicting idea. It became a different way of building up my idea and supporting it.

2. Clark, R. C. (2014). *American Literary Minimalism*. Tuscaloosa: The University Alabama Press.

This book shares a similar perspective on minimalism with the previous source, since both are written by the same person. Clark dives into the origins of minimalism and demonstrates its evolution, using literary works by different minimalist authors. The author also reflects on the literary tools that shape minimalism. He is one of the first authors to give a specific definition to the term and to provide a set of tools that define it.

I used this source to provide an overall background on minimalism in the first part of my capstone. It is the essential part of my project, since the reader needs to get a full understanding of the concept that is going to be discussed, analyzed, developed and applied. The book also enhanced my knowledge of the literary tools and devices that altogether construct a minimalist piece of literature. It developed my skills as a minimalist writer, which further assisted me in my short story writing process.

3. Greaney Ph. (2005). *Less is More: Literary Minimalism in American Short Story – Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver and Frederick Barthelme*. Open University.

This work demonstrates the issue of widespread misperception of minimalism as a literary style. The author draws parallels between underestimation of minimalism and short story as a genre. His main argument is that the reason behind scornful criticism of these genres and styles is lack of willingness to collaborate with the narrative. He believes that understanding short stories and minimalist literature requires a specific way of thinking. Greaney supports his statements quoting

a number of well-known literary critics and minimalist writers such as Cynthia Hallet and Amy Hempel.

This thesis provided me with sufficient knowledge about the early criticism on minimalism and short story writing. I used this information in the first part of my capstone, where I introduce the concept of minimalism. Also, Greaney's analysis of writings by minimalist authors helped me take away techniques for my own analysis of Carver and Hempel.

4. May, C. E. (2001). 'Do You See What I'm Saying?': The Inadequacy of Explanation and the Uses of Story in the Short Fiction of Raymond Carver. *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 31, 39.

This article discusses Carver's style of writing. It brings up the fact that Carver's characters are underdeveloped and inarticulate. May argues that an author should be loyal to his/her style. Thus, he somehow justifies Carver's minimalist style of writing. However, he simultaneously criticizes some of Carver's works and puts them in contrast with the authors other writings. May also analyzes the reasons behind the intentional creation of underdeveloped characters by discussing specific lines from Carver's stories.

With this source, I learnt about a unique approach towards Carver's style. I was able to compare this and many other views, read in similar critiques/analysis pieces, and come up with my own perception of Carver's characters, style and writing in general. I argued for or against this viewpoint, depending on my findings and further formulated opinion.

5. Prose, F. (2006). *Reading like a Writer: A Guide for People who Love Books and for those who Want to Write Them*. New York: HarperCollins.

In this book, the author reflects on literature and writing from a new perspective. Prose has a chapter by chapter division of different aspects of writing, such as words, sentences, narration

style, characterization and dialogue. She illustrates an interesting approach of close reading, which helps the reader get a deeper understanding of other pieces of literature. To support her arguments, the author applies her theories to various authors and their writings. The authors cited in her work include James Joyce, Herman Melville, Scott Spencer, Raymond Carver and many other renowned authors.

This book helped me improve my analytical and critical thinking skills in terms of close reading. It added up to my knowledge about the importance of details in writing. The techniques used by Prose to analyze different types of literature assisted me in conducting my own analysis of Raymond Carver and Amy Hempel.

6. Trussler, M. (1994). *The Narrowed Voice: Minimalism and Raymond Carver*. Newberry, S.C. 31 (1). 23-37.

This article discusses the basics of the concept of minimalism and its aesthetics. Trussler examines the representations that minimalism takes in Carver's literary works. He also draws on Carver's attitude towards his minimalist label and how his perception on the essence of minimalism affected his writing style.

The overall information on minimalism and aesthetics was used in the first part of my capstone, again, helping the reader get a full understanding of the style. By providing a background on Carver's perception of his own minimalism, this source helped me understand Carver's views better. It positively affected my analysis of his writing and style.

7. Vigderman, P. (1999). Review: *Almost No Center*. Kenyon College. 21 (2). 152-159.

This article is an analysis of Lydia Davis' work as a writer. Vigderman examines three stories by Davis, *Almost No Memory*, *Break it Down* and *The End of the Story*. The author reflects on her style and the nuances of understanding it. Line by line analysis of these pieces helps the reader

comprehend the hidden meanings in the very few details in Davis' stories. Vigderman also discusses the unique structure seen in most of Davis' writings and tries to explain it, again, using specific examples from the author's pieces.

This article assisted me in getting a better understanding of Hempel's literary style in general, by using Davis' example. Since the existing critical and analytical literature on Hempel is insufficient for my capstone, I had to concentrate even more on my own analysis of her writings, using the only source I could find on another female writer of the same time period. Thus, this was a good source for gaining knowledge about Davis' narrative structure, style and language and trying to draw parallels with those of Hempel's, in order to be able to conduct an original analysis.