Ralph Whiteman as White Construction in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”

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Introduction

Critics such as Charles E. May and Kirk Nesset mark Raymond Carver’s titular story in his first collection “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” as a harbinger. May considers it a “precursor to the stories in Cathedral because it is richer in background information and authorial guidance and because the story is more forgiving than the other stories in the collection” (43). Nesset suggests that the protagonist Ralph “is precursor to a new strain of character in Carver’s canon, anticipating characters who, in rare instances . . . come close to celebrating these struggles, finding comfort in the small, good things of their lives and consolation in the face of an incomprehensible, unfair, brutal world” (311).

Ralph Wyman represents one of several white protagonists found in Raymond Carver’s short stories whose whiteness is underscored by the presence of the other, be it black men in the case of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” and “Vitamins,” a blind man in “Cathedral,” or a Hispanic maid in “Gazebo.” In this sense “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” signifies not necessarily a precursor to more redemptive work but rather extant socially constructed hierarchies that privilege able bodied, white, heterosexual males present in much of Carver’s work.

In Carver’s short story “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” Ralph Wyman, or Ralph Whiteman, reconfigures his wounded white hetero-masculinity by assuming the
role of heterosexual white male victim. Ralph triggers his victimhood by homosocially confessing his wife’s sexual betrayal and his concomitant sexual inadequacy to a group of men. His homosocial confession allows him to inhabit the role of persecuted monolithic white heterosexual male without having to relinquish privilege or power or betray his possible sexual borderland. His violent encounter with the black mugger solidifies Ralph’s new masculine configuration by coupling his heterosexual victimhood with racial victimhood. Ralph’s contact with a construct of what Toni Morrison calls American Africanism contradistinctively aids in constructing Ralph’s single conscious mask of white male supremacy. His submissive sexual position at the end of the story symbolizes the transformation and his delusive new masculine self. A reading such as this aligns with Whiteness Studies, or Critical White Studies, scholars such as Noel Ignatiev, Steve Martinot, Toni Morrison, George Lipsitz, et alia, who for the last two decades or so have attempted to expose whiteness and white privilege as a social construct that draws its primary power from its perceived invisibility.

**Wounded White Hetero-masculinity**

The “arduous” yet “rewarding” privileged life of a heterosexual able-bodied white man promised to Ralph Wyman by his father, “principal of Jefferson Elementary School and trumpet soloist in the Weaverville Elks Club Auxiliary Band” (Carver 227), is abruptly thwarted when Ralph finds out with certainty that “his wife had once betrayed him with a man named Mitchell Anderson” (230). The very first thing Ralph does upon verifying his suspicions is check the color of his skin: “Then suddenly he knew . . . For a minute he could only stare dumbly at his hands” (238). Carver signifies Ralph Wyman’s whiteness
by his lack of racial signifiers, i.e. we know that Wyman is white because as Toni Morrison says of most white characters in U.S. fiction “nobody says so” (Morrison 72). Steve Martinot notes, “whites are not born white. There is no inherency to being white. They are given their whiteness by the white supremacist society into which they are born” (14). Martinot further points out, “‘race’ names a system of socio-political relations in which whites define themselves with respect to others they define as ‘non-white’ for that purpose. Because whites are the definers, ‘race’ is inseparable from white supremacy. That is, ‘race’ as a concept is inseparable from the white hierarchical domination that constructs it” (19). Just as race is constructed as an oppositional term, so is heteronormative masculinity, i.e. one is straight because one is not queer and one is masculine because one is not feminine. In both cases, the binaries define who has privilege and who does not. Ralph’s wounded masculinity and subsequent victimhood compel him to invest in these binaries because his victimhood is utterly dependent on the privileging of his white heteronormative identity.

Marian’s infidelity at once compromises Ralph’s “dominant fiction of patriarchy and phallic privilege” (Silverman 42). He is the cuckold, the fool, and immediately wonders whether his children are really his. Ralph asks Marian, “Did he come in you? Did you let him come in you when you were having a go at it?” (Carver 238). Instead of beating Marian like he did the morning she came home after being with Mitchel Anderson, Ralph assumes the role of white male heterosexual victim in order to ultimately recoup his position of power. Ralph’s sense of victimhood is similar to those whom David Savran describes as “white, heterosexual, working- and lower-middle-class men who believe themselves to be the victims of the scant economic and social progress
made in the U.S. over the past thirty years by African Americans, women, and other racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. Trading places, rhetorically at least, with the people they loathe, they imagine themselves . . . the new persecuted minority” (128). Possibly furthering Ralph’s insecure masculine footing is the fact that his wife “was offered a post as a French and English instructor at the junior college at the edge of town, and Ralph had stayed on at the high school” (Carver 230). Perhaps Ralph feels insecure about his wife teaching at a higher level. By inhabiting the role of white male heterosexual victim, Ralph “simultaneously [embraces] and [disavows] the role of victim” (Savran 128). Victimhood serves the monolith of privilege by protesting its fragmentation.

**Homosocial Suicide and Sexual Borderlands**

Ralph’s first act under the guise of victimhood is to go out drinking, demonstrating self-pity and power since he knows that Marian will not repeat her infraction by leaving for the night. Once Ralph leaves his wife and kids and ventures out into the night, he solidifies his victimhood by committing homosocial suicide. Michael S. Kimmel notes, “Masculinity is a homosocial enactment. We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks all because we want other men to grant us our manhood” (187). In Ralph’s case, he wants other men to know that his wife has betrayed him so that he can claim victimhood and maintain his position as patriarch. Not long after he leaves home, “He remembered a man he saw once sitting on a curb in Arcata, an old man with a growth of beard and a brown wool cap who just sat there with his arms between his legs. And then Ralph thought: Marian! Dorothea! Robert! It was impossible” (Carver 240).
Ralph’s alternatives to victimhood, including beating Marian or leaving, may lead to his estrangement from his family, a predicament he likens to a homeless man.

The sequence of scenes in which Ralph executes his homosocial suicide occurs in markedly male spaces, including the men’s room and a poker game:

Ralph looked around for the toilet . . . Inside, in line behind three other men, he found himself staring at opened thighs and vulva drawn on the wall over a pocket-comb machine. Beneath was scrawled EAT ME, and lower down someone had added Betty M. Eats It . . . His life had changed, he was willing to understand.

Were there other men . . . who could look at one event in their lives and perceive in it the tiny makings of the catastrophe that thereafter set their lives on a different course? (243)

The men’s room represents a male space in which Ralph musters up the strength to assume the role of victim in front of other men. Betty, a sexualized and dehumanized female construct scrawled on the wall, functions as a reminder and stand-in for Marian that although most masculine spaces exist homosocially or devoid of women, “Women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale” (Kimmel 186). In other words, women, especially white women, always already figure into a hetero-homosocial equation as dehumanized spoil and status symbol with the power also to emasculate men, a power simultaneously responsible for misogyny and in Ralph’s case feigned victimhood

Ralph then exchanges one male space for another. After he leaves the men’s room he notices some men playing cards and “Suddenly he knew that nothing could save him but to be in the same room with the card players” (Carver 244). For Ralph, the male ritual
of poker represents a perfect space in which to commit homosocial suicide, a sort of symbolic death of his masculine self so that he can reconfigure it as victim and eventually reclaim it. Ralph establishes his place at the table by nodding after “The dealer said gently, still not looking up, ‘Low ball or five card. Table stakes, five-dollar limit on raises” (245). Ralph’s fluency in the arcane language legitimizes his place at the table “as if there were a code to be uncovered” (239). Only after proving that he belongs in the male space does Ralph sabotage himself. Without warning he says, “My wife played around with another guy two years ago. I found out tonight” (246). Ralph’s admission primes him for victimhood and allows him to return home and reassume his role as patriarch. His confession of his wife’s betrayal is the last bit of dialogue Ralph has with the men before he leaves the bar.

Ralph’s admission to his wife’s infidelity functions as both a means to victimhood and a denial of his sexual borderlands. Gloria Anzaldúa describes a borderland as a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants . . . the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer” (3). Ralph Wyman is quite possibly a queer character in the closet, unable or unwilling to reveal his sexual borderland and risk his position of heteronormative power. Carver notes that perhaps the greatest single influence on Ralph’s life was “Dr. Maxwell . . . a handsome, graceful man in his early forties, with exquisite manners and with just the trace of the South in his voice. He had been educated at Vanderbilt, had studied in Europe . . . Almost overnight, Ralph would later say, he decided on teaching as a career” (228). On two separate occasions during Ralph’s night out the text suggests possible homosexual encounters.
The first centers on Ralph’s queer subject position regarding the card dealer. Ralph fixates on the dealer: “The dealer was a large man; he wore a white shirt, open at the collar, the sleeves rolled back once to expose forearms thick with black curling hair. Ralph drew a long breath” (245). The combined description of Dr. Maxwell as “handsome” and that what Ralph notices about the dealer mostly is his black curling hair evocative of pubic hair suggests Ralph’s queer subject position. Further, the dealer says to Ralph, “You really want some action, we can go to my place when we finish here” (246). The last thing Ralph thinks about before he is accosted by the black man is Dr. Maxwell, and once again he describes him as handsome: “He thought how Dr. Maxwell would handle a thing like this, and he reached into the sack as he walked, broke the seal on the little bottle and stopped in a doorway to take a long drink and thought Dr. Maxwell would sit handsomely at the water’s edge” (247). The problem is that Ralph’s masculine reconfiguration necessitates that he not be queer. Playing the role of victim only works to Ralph’s advantage if he maintains his white heteronormative subject position because anything less than that would undermine his privilege and likely cost him his family.

Both Arthur F. Bethea and Nesset allude to Ralph’s fear of sexuality. Bethea notes, “[Ralph] . . . [retreats] from the complexities inherent in his . . . sexuality” (133). Nesset contends, “Ralph’s fear of the uncontrollably feminine arises with sporadic intensity during his nightmarish descent into hell” (308). Further, if we were to compare Ralph to the narrator in “Cathedral,” a story again that critics think “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” anticipates, perhaps we could draw the distinction between Ralph’s reluctance to explore his latent homosexuality and the narrator in “Cathedral’s” subtle willingness to do so. As Chris J. Bullock suggests about the story “Cathedral,” “Before
The drawing, the designing of an alternative masculinity, can begin, the narrator must
change his isolation orientation by finding . . . his connection to his inner life . . . For the
drawing itself one more thing is required: a relation to the feminine” (343). Ultimately,
while the narrator of “Cathedral” succeeds in creating an alternative masculinity marked
by, at the very least, a relaxing of masculine normativity, Ralph’s goal is to clear an
alternative path back to his normative masculine position by way of victimhood, a path
necessitating normative masculine rigidity. The fear of sexuality that both Bethea and
Nesset notice perhaps is not so much Ralph’s fear of his wife’s sexuality as much as it is
Ralph’s fear of his own sexual borderlands. The distinct difference in the two
protagonists in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” and “Cathedral” further undermines
the notion that the stories represent thematic continuity.

American Africanism and Double Consciousness

The final catalyst for Ralph’s transformation from patriarch to victim back to patriarch
occurs when Ralph is mugged by a black man:

A small Negro in a leather jacket stepped out in front of him and said, ‘Just a
minute there, man.’ . . . Before Ralph could run the Negro hit him hard in the
stomach, and when Ralph groaned and tried to fall, the man hit him in the nose
with his open hand, knocking him back against the wall, where he sat down with
one leg turned under him and was learning how to raise himself up when the
Negro slapped him on the cheek and knocked him sprawling onto the pavement.
(247-48)
Ralph’s encounter with the black man denotes a case of constructed American Africanism, a “carefully invented, Africanist presence” (Morrison 6). Ralph emerges from this encounter as a fully reconstructed white male heterosexual victim. Violent contact with a construct of American Africanism more fully defines Ralph’s sense of victimhood and concomitant entitlement, for “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself not as enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (Morrison 52). Applying Toni Morrison’s “project . . . to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served” (90), allows one to highlight the effect of the mugging not so much in terms of racial stereotypes but on Ralph himself, the white male heterosexual victim. Vanessa Hall on the other hand believes about the racialized encounter in the story that, “Blackness here—criminal and menacing—physically interferes with Ralph’s attempt to reconstruct his whiteness” (96). Hall’s reading is dangerously close to aligning with the myth of the black rapist, the belief that black men are inherently hypersexual and bent on rape. Angela Y. Davis, one of the first theorists to historically contextualize the myth of the black rapist not long after the abolishment of slavery, argues, “lynchings, reserved during slavery for the white abolitionists, were proving to be a valuable political weapon. Before lynching could be consolidated as a popularly accepted institution, however, its savagery and its horrors had to be convincingly justified. These were the circumstances which spawned the myth of the Black rapist” (185). Hall contends, “If whiteness is measured by intellect, restraint of
appetites, and planning for the future, then blackness is measured by an absence of restraint and by excessive appetites, particularly sexual ones” (95). Hall evokes this stereotype by suggesting that Ralph’s whiteness equates impotence and that his violent clash with the black man somehow results in Ralph being able to have sex with his wife. She notes,

Ralph’s flirtation with blackness seems to result in his succumbing to some of the desires he has rigidly repressed—a positive outcome, the ending of the story indicates. ‘Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?’ thereby effects a critique of the more restrictive effects of whiteness, showing particular concern with sexuality and its relationship with masculinity, but it can only do this by invoking a male other who is a repository for all of the suppressed desires Ralph has denied himself. Flirting with blackness can be beneficial for white men, though Carver’s invocation of black criminality (signified by the mugger) signifies the clearly undesirable end of the stereotypes he draws on. (Hall 96)

Ralph’s contact with the black man, rather than a critique of whiteness or an instantiation of black hypersexuality, aids in establishing Ralph’s whiteness and contributing to his role as persecuted heterosexual white male that allows him to maintain his position of power. Ralph’s entire life has been predicated on his whiteness, from his “handsomely pale and slender girl” (Carver 228) to his feelings of disgust due to “the squalor and open lust he saw in Mexico” (229). Ralph’s contact with the black man binarily casts Ralph as the true American, the victim, and gives him the moral high ground on which to return home triumphant. Toni Morrison asserts that whiteness in the U.S. has always hypocritically assumed a squalid racial other:
The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility. Although, in fact, the escape was sometimes an escape from license—from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined—for those fleeing for reasons other than religious ones, constraint and limitation impelled the journey.

(34)

Indeed, Ralph’s mugging does not infuse him with sexuality but rather infuses him with whiteness and privilege and the hubris to return home armed with both a tacit denial of his sexual borderland and a constructed whiteness that purports to be a single monolithic consciousness opposed to one that is fragmented or doubled. W.E.B. Du Bois observes, “One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (8-9). It seems appropriate that on Ralph’s transformative night he “[comes] to Second Street, the part of town people called ‘Two Street’ . . . He had been down here once, six years ago, to a secondhand shop to finger through the dusty shelves of old books. There was a liquor store across the street” (Carver 241). His white male heterosexual victimhood requires oppositional proximity. In order to construct his role as monolithic white male hetero-victim he must set himself in opposition to that which is not monolithic, in this case the fragmented consciousness of a racial other.

Ralph’s limited transformation at the end of the story accounts for his sexually submissive position. Once again, just before a key moment in the story, Ralph takes note
of his skin: “He stood naked on the tiles before getting into the water. He gathered in his fingers the slack flesh over his ribs. He studied his face again in the clouded mirror. He started in fear when Marian called his name” (251). Ralph’s evolution from patriarch to victim back to patriarch is not without risk. Perhaps his new role as victim will not result in the status quo. Perhaps he will not be able to perform sexually in his new role. Nevertheless, Ralph returns to Marian disguised as a victim, an insulted white man, a white man’s white man. Carver writes,

He tensed at her fingers, and then he let go a little. It was easier to let go a little. Her hand moved over his hip and over his stomach and she was pressing her body over his now and moving over him and back and forth over him. He held himself, he later considered, as long as he could. And then he turned to her. He turned and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him.

(251)

Even though Marian pressing her body over Ralph’s and moving back and forth evokes an image of Marian as the sexual aggressor, there is no indication that Ralph has really changed that much. His victimhood has allowed him an alternative path to white male supremacy less perilous than one of violence or anomic masculinity that would surely lead to the loss of his family and his role as patriarch.

As Bullock finds, “many of his [Carver’s] heroes are concerned with dilemmas of masculine identity” (343). Of these heroes, many of them are involved in the “isolation of the masculine ego, its pushing away of relationship with others and with other parts of the psyche” (343). This notion of pushing away is another way of saying that some of Carver’s protagonists deny any sort of psychological fragmentation that may undermine
their claim to political whiteness. As Robert Miltner points out, Raymond Carver often presents “the stereotypical masculine persona of his formative years during the 1950s: a young man given to drinking, working blue-collar jobs, hunting and fishing, posing as the ‘tough guy’ engaged in the reckless, destructive behavior that dominated the first half of his life, the alcoholic ‘Bad Raymond’ days that preceded his sobriety” (55). This sort of fundamental hegemonic U.S. American hypermasculinity depends on the denial of a fragmented consciousness, or as Bullock puts it, “any visitor [who] may be a potential assailant . . . [or] particularly intense threat” (343). By the end of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” Ralph has rebuilt his white heteronormative masculinity by assuming the role of victim catalyzed by his homosocial suicide and his encounter with a construct of American Africanism. His disguise as white male heterosexual victim also serves as a denial of his possible sexual borderlands and fragmented consciousness. For as Toni Morrison notes, “images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable” (59). If W.E.B Du Bois and Gloria Anzaldúa define otherness by pointing to its internal fragmentation in a world where normativity is constructed binarily and then privileged, then one can define white male heteronormativity as the internal false denial of double consciousness and sexual borderlands. Despite Ralph’s deep masculine insecurities and new role as victim, he emerges at the end of the story with his whiteness and his heteronormative privilege and power completely intact.
Works Cited


