Masculinity and the Domestic Space: Reconsidering “Neighbors” and “Collectors”

Katarina Polonsky, Independent Scholar

Ever since the traditional paradigms of masculinity—man as the breadwinner and in control of the public sphere—became increasingly challenged by women liberating themselves from the domestic sphere (Kimmel 271), that sphere has become, often, a site of trauma for masculinity. This shift in American culture, which triggered the phenomenon of disenfranchised males, also finds an echo in Raymond Carver’s work, especially in “Fever,” a story in which a wife, Eileen, has left her husband, Carlyle, and two children in order to pursue her dream of becoming an artist. At first devastated by her absence, Carlyle gradually learns to cope with the enormous domestic and parental demands incumbent on a single parent and emerges from this trial strengthened by the suffering he has gone through.

Not all of Carver’s housebound male protagonists are victims of feminist wives, however. The male characters in “They’re Not Your Husband,” “Viewfinder,” “What Is It?”, “What Do You Do in San Francisco?”, “Collectors,” or “Preservation” (to cite only a few) have succumbed to physical and psychological inertia because they are jobless, alcoholic, or simply shiftless. Such narratives, in which the male is no longer the breadwinner and is often confined to the home, are said to depict “catastrophic [male] failure” (Meyer 22), “wounded masculinity” (Weber 87), male misogyny (Eigeartaigh 51), or existential isolation. The overtones of failure and catastrophe in these judgments appeared to be substantiated by Carver’s own claims that his post-drinking Cathedral stories were more optimistic than his earlier texts. Gendered interpretations have
corroborated these verdicts, generally reappraising his representations of women while discrediting the male characters of Carver’s early stories.

This essay seeks to revisit this harsh view of Carver’s males as prisoners of a crippling, emasculating domestic environment; it argues that, occasionally, as in “Collectors” (1970) and “Neighbors” (1972), Carver believes in the possibility of their survival and even growth within the domestic space. Unlike “Fever,” in which the growth achieved by Carlyle is manifest, in the above stories it is only hinted at; neither of our two pre-<i>Cathedral</i> stories shows the protagonists in a better position at the end than at the beginning. But both narratives contain <i>signs</i> that point to a slight shift these male characters have undergone or to an impact the events of the story have had on them, making change imminent.

In his theory of home territories, John Porteous explains how the domestic territory connects with our selfhood and constitutes our psychic territorial core (384). When the home’s spatial boundaries are stimulated or actively defended, there is an inextricable psychological “awakening and assertion of identity” (386).

In “Collectors,” the jobless first-person narrator is trapped inside his home: “I lay on the sofa and listened to the rain. Now and then I’d lift up and look through the curtain for the mailman . . . You can’t be too careful if you’re out of work” (Carver <i>Where I’m Calling From</i> 90). A salesman named Aubrey Bell knocks on his door asking if he is Mr. Slater. The protagonist does not get up, nor does he answer the question. The salesman asks if Mrs. Slater is home, claiming that she has “won something.” The narrator replies that “Mrs. Slater doesn’t live here.” (90). Bell asks again if the answering voice is Mr. Slater; ignoring the question a second time, the narrator gets up from the sofa and opens the door.
Mrs. Slater has won a “free vacuuming and carpet shampoo” (92) that Bell proceeds to test on the carpet but also on other domestic objects such as bed and pillows. While he is vacuuming, a letter is dropped in the mailbox. The narrator “twice started toward the letter” but Bell “seemed to anticipate me, cut me off . . . ” (95). At the end of the story Bell picks up the letter, which is for a Mr. Slater, folds it in half, pockets it, and asks the narrator: “You want to see it? . . . You don’t believe me?” to which the narrator answers that “it just seems strange” (96).

This exchange of words is also strange for the reader, who does not know who Mr. and Mrs. Slater are or what the letter’s contents are. Moreover, the reader is mystified by Bell’s intrusive and covetous ways: he promises that he “will see to it [the letter]” as he leaves the narrator’s premises. The protagonist never confirms that he is Mr. Slater, but neither does he ever deny it. The numerous enigmas about the Slaters lead one to suspect that this story has something to do with the protagonist’s identity—an identity whose decipherment is made all the more difficult by Slater’s joblessness, indolence on the sofa, and by his isolation from the outside world. As if to reinforce his image of submission and disenfranchisement, his feminine foil, Mrs. Slater, has a name because she has shown agency: she “doesn’t live here” anymore and is, therefore, tellingly described as “a winner” (91). If the letter represents the symbolic “delivery” of the narrator’s identity—an identity that is still embryonic—his hesitation in picking it up suggests that he is not yet ready to assume his selfhood but that he may, with Bell’s help, be waking from his torpor and sensing the first stirrings of self-assertion.

Bell’s trespassing stirs Slater’s territorial instincts. Bell’s name itself alludes to his “noisy” disturbance of the narrator’s passivity (Boxer and Phillips 85). Furthermore, insofar as the name “Bell” also evokes a device used to give a signal and warning, vaguely echoing the opening sounds of a (boxing) match, it suggests that the impending
conflict will involve a specifically *masculine* retort. Later, Bell’s reference to Rilke living in castles recalls the psychological connection between habitat and identity. The charged allusion to a figure who was familiar with the psychic virtues of the home territory suggests that the narrator will, like Rilke, also reclaim selfhood in his “castle.”

Bell’s symbolic act of filling the “vacuum” of the protagonist’s already hollow life with a free “vacuum” resonates with spiritual overtones. His humor, his quiet “churchly voice,” his religious invocation, and the halo-like “ring around his scalp” (92)—also reminiscent of a monk’s tonsure—depict him as a redemptive figure capable of *cleansing* the protagonist, or at least of shaking him out of his lethargy. This is also suggested syntactically by his hypnotic description of Bell’s movements: “back and forth, back and forth over the worn carpet . . . his sweeping and his sweeping . . .” (95).

Bell resuscitates the narrator’s figurative domestic grave as he removes from it bits of dead matter (“the dusty stuff” [94]). Bell’s monastic charitableness is also highlighted by his indifference to remuneration. He goes “about his business” regardless of Slater’s warning that he won’t be able to pay him for the vacuum cleaner or his work: “You know I can’t pay anything, I said. I couldn’t pay you a dollar if my life depended on it. You’re going to have to write me off as a dead loss, that’s all. You’re wasting your time on me, I said” (95).

After Bell “shut[s] off the machine,” the sudden silence reinforces the protagonist’s newfound tranquility as he calmly puts the “dust, hair and small grainy things” of his former self in the garbage (95). Equally symbolic is a “bottle” containing “a few ounces of green liquid” that Bell also brought along and that he hooks “to a new attachment on his hose.” As he moves “slowly over the carpet,” Slater releases “little streams of emerald” liquid and works up “patches of foam” (95). The emerald stone is said to have had healing qualities for the ancient Romans, who believed that “the very
soul of an individual was restored when they wore emerald jewelry . . . whereas in modern times, it is said to help those who suffer from depression or other mental or emotional disorders. “

Green, the color of fecund nature, also connotes growth and metamorphosis; the narrator is, symbolically, undergoing a regenerative “cleansing” of his old self that contrasts sharply with the intimations of worthlessness (“dead loss”) he felt before Bell sprinkled his green liquid. This also explains his growing ease: “I sat on the chair in the kitchen, relaxed now, and watched him work” (emphasis added). At the end, when Bell asks him if he wants the vacuum cleaner or not, Slater answers: “No . . . I guess not. I’m going to be leaving here soon. It would just be in the way” (96). Through his intrusive vacuuming Bell has figuratively sucked up the narrator’s passive identity and provoked him into reclaiming his selfhood. His concluding, epiphanous understanding that the advertised object “would just be in the way” of his pending mobilization suggests the healing of his lethargy and his increasingly enfranchised sense of selfhood.

In both “Collectors” and “Neighbors,” verbal communication is problematic. But instead of accepting what Catherine Jurca maintains is the apparent norm for American suburban males—a sullen state of perpetual isolation (157)—Carver may be giving his male protagonists the possibility of forging alternative, meaningful connections. Ben Highmore’s theory on the everyday can help us elucidate these alternative connections. He notes that the most commonplace and inconspicuous elements of the everyday can hold bizarre and mysterious possibilities for change and transformation (54). When examined closely, the unnoticed and unobtrusive features, actions, objects and experiences of everyday life can reveal a revolutionary and marvelous power (16). So can, in Carver’s stories, the pregnant silences prevailing in domestic spaces.
According to Kirk Nesset, Carver’s men evolve thanks to the influence of another being (“Insularity” 117); collaborating with others frees them from self-absorption. In “Collectors” too, the narrator’s casual encounter with a salesman also transmutes into an implicit connection between them that sparks off the narrator’s self-fulfilment. There are no quotation marks in the first-person narrative “Collectors,” an absence that suggests the protagonist’s unfamiliarity with conventional communication: “Another knock, and I said, Who’s there? / This is Aubrey Bell, a man said. Are you Mr. Slater?” (90) This uncanny absence of quotation marks highlights the strangeness of some of life’s encounters. Moreover, by removing speech marks from this story, Carver embeds the spoken word within the narrative itself. Speech visually and literally becomes part of the background. By deemphasizing speech, the text foregrounds the possibility of other forms of communication.

Bell’s eccentric appearance alerts us to his symbolic function in the story and adumbrates the transformative effect of his silent connection with the narrator. Recognizing that he is symbolic, Mathias Keller calls Bell an “angel-of-death,” “a nightmare-scenario” (11). An angel indeed, yet Keller misconstrues the type: Carver does not show the narrator dying, nor is Bell explicitly evil. The root of “Aubrey” means “fair ruler” (Freedman 19) and, thus, suggests his virtue. Laughing and grinning, Bell ruptures the narrator’s isolation, cleans his home. By encouraging the narrator to work “steadily” with him, Bell functions as a symbolic angel-of-the-house, a male figure that can show solidarity and connect with the narrator through the performance of domestic chores.

Tellingly, the loud “hum of the vacuum” drowns out Bell’s small-talk and, thereby, highlights the importance of their non-verbal connection (94). Similarly, Bell’s unconnected references to Rilke, Voltaire and W. H. Auden (93) underscore the
disjointedness of the men’s verbal exchanges. Instead, their cooperation and bond occur silently, as they work together, exchanging glances and nods (93-94), and by holding pillows, mattresses, filters and scoops.

Towards the story’s end, the narrator owns up to the self-enlarging effects of his connection with Bell and describes himself as feeling “relaxed” (95). He also asks his guest, “You want coffee?” (95), an offer that shows him breaking out of his isolation. But Bell, having cleaned the home, has fulfilled his symbolic function and senses that he had “better be off” (96).

In “Neighbors,” Bill and Arlene Miller have been asked by the Stones, the couple living across the hall from them, to look after their house while the latter are away. Although described as a “happy couple,” the Millers are envious of the Stones, who appear to live “a fuller and brighter life,” whereas they feel that they “had been passed by somehow” (Carver, Where I’m Calling From 68). When Bill first enters his neighbors’ premises, he finds the “air already heavy and . . . vaguely sweet.” After tending to the Millers’ cat, Kitty, and the plants, he lingers in their apartment, going through their medicine chest and liquor cabinet, and even putting some of Harriet Stone’s pills in his pocket and taking “two drinks” from a bottle of Chivas (69). The effect of penetrating into the Stones’ intimate space arouses Bill sexually, as it will Arlene when it is her turn to feed Kitty. Bill grows bolder with every visit, rummaging through and even trying on the Stones’ clothes—Jim’s as well as Harriet’s. One day, Arlene tells Bill about “some pictures” she discovered in a drawer; they decide to go back together only to realize that Arlene has left the key inside. The realization that they have been locked out distresses them, but Bill whispers in Arlene’s ear, “Don’t
worry . . . For God’s sake, don’t worry.” At the end of the story, “they leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves.” (73).

Described as “a salesman” who is always “traveling about the country somewhere in connection with [his] work” (68) and plainly circumventing any domestic emasculation, Jim Stone strikes an enviable contrast to Bill Miller. Looking after the Stones’ apartment thus offers Bill psychological stimulation and the prospect of new boundaries (68). As Abigail Bowers notes, the Stones’ “fuller and brighter” life renders their home a “Garden of Eden” for Bill: here, he can enact his fantasies and role-play Jim (99). Yet Bowers’s conclusion that Arlene and Bill’s transgressions bring about a state of “postlapsarian” disenfranchisement overlooks the fact that Carver depicts Bill as being already disenfranchised. Accordingly, one can see the act of entering the Stones’ “Edenic” apartment as representative of an enfranchising return to a “prelapsarian” epoch of male mastery and control. The apartment’s exoticism, with its overtones of primeval atmosphere, substantiates this: Bill takes “a deep breath” before entering the “cooler” and “darker” area (72), noticing that “the air [is] already heavy” and “vaguely sweet.” The sunburst clock, evoking both time and light, recalls the first dawning of sunlight in Eden, and Bill’s memory of Harriet “cradling” it like “an infant” (69) further suggests a temporal return to a site of (re)birth.

Here, Bill is able to reclaim his sense of territorial authority as he moves “slowly through each room . . . considering everything that [falls] under his gaze” (71). In this metaphoric Eden, his senses are reawakened and his consciousness heightened: he “[sees] everything.” His bizarre behavior—sniffing and chewing haphazardly in the kitchen, napping and masturbating in the bedroom—reflects a return to primitive drives. Revealingly, his ultimate “rebirth” occurs on his third visit (the number three also connoting symbolic and spiritual significance), when “he shed his own clothes,” and
meaningfully “smiled at himself in the mirror” (71), pleased with his new sense of self. Arlene undergoes a similarly empowering experience—for example, taking unusually long in the Stones’ apartment and leaving with the color “high in her cheeks” (73)—but Carver focuses mainly on Bill’s experience. Both Bill and Arlene, therefore, return to a seemingly prelapsarian state, one that dramatizes archetypal gender dynamics: “Neighbors” suggests the possibility of reclaiming a masculine selfhood within the home territory. Thus, while Arlene initially had domestic authority over Bill, these transformations signal his return home as a newly enfranchised man: now, he takes her hand, “he stood in the kitchen doorway” and “he let them into their apartment” (72, emphasis added).

When Arlene “le[aves] the key inside” the Stones’ house (73), her breathing becomes “hard, expectant,” but Bill promptly reassures her by clasping her in his arms and murmuring, “Don’t worry . . . For God’s sake, don’t worry.” This charged, gendered image of Arlene’s vulnerability—symbolized by her labored breathing and by Bill’s protective arms around her—shows that he no longer needs Arlene to take “good care” of him (68). Bill’s protective instinct and authoritative tone seem to illustrate his regained masculinity, at the same time that they recall Eve’s staunch dependence on Adam after their exile. Bill has crossed domestic frontiers and returned to his home with a newfound masculine selfhood.

Whereas in most narratives of twentieth-century male suburbanites the men reject opportunities for change, according to Jurca (16), Carver’s stories offer an alternative vision. His homes are inextricably problematic: each story suggests some form of departure from the domestic space that ultimately complicates the male protagonist’s relationship with his home. Yet it is precisely these explorations that lead the
protagonists towards some form of progress and change, transforming them from passive to active agents within the domestic realm.

Going through the neighbors’ apartment to satisfy his urge for annexation, Bill rids himself of his identity, “shed[ding] his own clothes and slip[ping] into” Jim Stone’s “fuller and brighter” image. Wearing Jim’s wing-tip shoes, bermudas and dark suit, Bill narcissistically “smile[s], observing himself in the mirror” (71). In the episode that follows, he puts on women’s clothes:

He rummaged through the top drawers until he found a pair of panties and a brassiere. He stepped into the panties and fastened the brassiere, then looked through the closet for an outfit. He put on a black and white checkered skirt and tried to zip it up. He put on a burgundy blouse that buttoned up at the front. (72) Emulating Harriet’s image, Bill’s ersatz replacements for his identity work to radically undermine any notion of genuine selfhood. This cross-dressing—performed in a state of mild intoxication—further confuses his identity. Having finished the drink before cross-dressing, Bill is now intoxicated, both physically and aesthetically—and in the process of losing his selfhood. The text’s syntactical repetition of him putting on Harriet’s clothing paints his actions as uncontrolled, which further undermines his efforts. His attempt to zip up the outfit and literally seal the new image of himself confirms the act’s inadequacy.

This revelation occurs to Bill when, considering her shoes, he “understood they would not fit. For a long time he looked out the living-room window from behind the curtain. Then he returned to the bedroom and put everything away” (72, emphasis added). Bill begins to understand what he will later tell Arlene: “It is funny” to step into someone else’s shoes “like that” (72). In his final, unsuccessful attempt to step into Harriet’s shoes, Bill is reminded of the physical “reality” of his masculinity.
By considering the object of his desire from above and realizing that the image quite literally doesn’t fit, Bill is able to re-establish his objectivity, and thus reassess his actions. Moreover, one could see this in a Freudian sense, whereby this distance between himself and the desired object reinstalls his dominant male gaze and reminds him of his masculinity. Bill’s ensuing gaze out of the window embodies the last stage of his illumination, an action that shows him familiarizing himself with this new perspective. Later, the text confirms Bill’s newly ascendant selfhood through the repeated motif of the Stones’ image. The erotic pictures that Arlene finds function as a literal and physical image of the Stones, and thus his illumination is clear when she notably reminds us that now Bill “can see for [himself]” (73): the Stones’ image that Bill, in the past, wanted to physically adopt and replace his own identity with has now become a detached and exterior object that he can enjoy as himself. No longer masquerading under a false identity, Bill can assume a more genuine selfhood.

With the lack of a “material” attachment to any home in “Collectors,” and the loss of the Stones’ apartment in “Neighbors,” how the male protagonists will articulate their future selfhoods remains ambivalent. Nonetheless, Carver’s stories offer them the chance to forgo self-pity and move beyond their disenfranchisement by offering them the possibility of pursuing a more genuine and emancipated selfhood.

Carver’s men must also learn to connect with others in the domestic space if they are to attain true selfhood. In “Neighbors,” Bill Miller’s everyday silences, shared with his wife within his home, also lead to a transforming connection. As Nesset notes, Carver dramatizes the Millers’ “marriage in the process of diminishing” (“Insularity” 297). As their communication breaks down, we see them speak primarily of discontent: “[Feeling] passed by somehow . . . They talked about it sometimes, mostly in comparison . . . [to] . . . their neighbors” (68). Since their subsequent verbal exchanges
are about the Stones, their personal relationship can be, in a way, understood as “silent.” However, by claiming that their marriage ultimately disintegrates (298), Nesset underestimates silence’s potential.

Through their unspoken yet shared transgressions in the Stones’ apartment, the Millers experience a renewed connection between them, a connection metaphorized by the Stones’ cat, Kitty (69). Cats are silent yet mystical symbols of transformative power and knowledge according to Nicholas Saunders. Evidence of this power can be seen after the first time Bill assumes “cat duty”: after “playing with Kitty,” he touches Arlene’s breasts and suggests that they “go to bed” (69). Later, when Arlene admits she too has “been playing with Kitty,” Bill begins “kissing her on the neck and hair” (73). Kitty strengthens the connection between them: before each sexual encounter with Arlene, Bill is aware of Kitty “moving about,” “appear[ing] at his feet” or “look[ing] at him steadily” (71). Moreover, as a cat, Kitty herself is mute, and thus one is tempted to see her as a silent source of knowledge since she is the sole figure privy to the Millers’ transgressive behaviors. In this way, Kitty literally embodies the power of silence, for all her unspoken insights into their connection.

By the end of the story, the Millers’ transformation is clear. While Nesset’s assertions that the Millers have been dependent on “stimulus from outside influences” are valid, his suggestion that their passion is false seems harsh (297). For as we have seen in the ending, “Neighbors” seems to end on a compelling image of the Millers’ intimacy: “They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves” (73). This is a clear affirmation of reconnection. The use of the third-person plural pronoun “they” in a series of three emphatic clauses, all of which contain verbs denoting sustenance and support, has the effect of reproducing the sense of the Millers’ solidarity and endurance (73). The act of leaning
into the door together, confronting the forces unleashed by their transgression, suggests a forward progression rather than a retreat. Moreover, it is crucial that this final, silent union take place outside the Stones’ apartment, suggesting that the Millers will return to their own reality to grow and transform together.

In these stories, words fail Carver’s protagonists, but the quotidian domestic experience of silence opens up the possibility of alternative connections that can bring transformation and growth. Carver shows the possibility of creating alternative connections through the silences that afflict his characters in their everyday domestic spaces.

In “Collectors” and “Neighbors,” Carver places the male protagonists in a domestic situation that compels each to confront and overcome disenfranchisement and to move beyond self-pity and passivity. As they do so, they begin to exert some control over their home territory, an achievement that encourages them to forge new, restorative connections. The protagonists’ futures remain undecided in ways that allow for the possibility of change, expansion and growth.

Scholars have viewed the pre-\textit{Cathedral} fictions as narratives of despair, desolation and hopelessness. But these stories do not simply portray the “desperate and hopeless sense of something gone-wrong” (92), as Dean Flower suggests, nor are their protagonists “victims of anguish they can neither brave nor name” (Saltzman 21). Rather, they often end on epiphanic notes of survival and possible opening up: Carver’s early stories \textit{do} adumbrate the faith and possibility that are present in his post-\textit{Cathedral} narratives.
Works Cited


Boxer, David, and Cassandra Philips. “‘Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?’: Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver.” Iowa Review 10.3 (1979): 75-90.


1 Invoking the expression “a man’s home is his castle,” Bell may be suggesting that the narrator’s space is, likewise, a potential castle.
2 http://www.jewelrynotes.com/emerald-gemstone-meaning-symbolism-healing/
3 Communion through food is frequent in Carver. In “Careful,” for instance, after having his hearing redeemed by Inez, Lloyd attempts to reconnect with her through coffee. A similar use of coffee is also seen in “Viewfinder.”
4 Susan Faludi explains that narcissism is “the route to manhood [. . .] through the looking-glass” (42).