

# Love and alcohol in beginners



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In Raymond Carver's short story "Beginners," the use of alcohol is the most apparent and important image and helps show the characters' true feelings about their love life. Through the characters' consumption of alcohol, we are able to see their eventual confusion and simplification of the meaning of true love.

Carver begins the story with the characters having a full bottle of gin, symbolizing their full understanding of their views of the meaning of love. Herb explains that his view of love is spiritual love, and nothing less, which initially brings them onto the subject of love (Carver 1). While Terri explains her past abusive relationship and how it was Carl's way of showing his love, the group becomes uncomfortable and continues drinking. Terri seems sure of herself when she explains that true love is expressed physically and asks the group, "What do you do with love like that?" (2). The conversation eventually drifts, giving Nick and Laura the opportunity to explain their "perfect" relationship. At this moment, Laura believes that she has found true love in Nick. After "putting on a show" for the group by showing their affection, Herb announces, "Let's have a toast. I want to propose a toast. A toast to love. True love" (5). At this moment the group is content and believes that they are all in love and satisfied. "There was suddenly a feeling of ease and generosity around the table, of friendship and comfort. We could have been anywhere. We raised our glasses again and grinned at each other like children who had agreed on something for once" (6). Nick, the narrator, explains the atmosphere of the room as warm and light, as they all agree on what they believe true love is.

As the story continues, the characters constantly raise their glasses and start to become more confused about their impressions of love as the alcohol takes effect. Herb is the one to bring back the topic of love and his views on Terri's past relationship with Carl even though the group seems to be uncomfortable. " I don't have to be drunk to say what's on my mind, do I? I'm not drunk. We're just talking, right?" Herb said. Then his voice changed. " But if I want to get drunk I will, God damn it. I can do anything I want today" (7). He explains that the group and he don't really know anything about love. " It ought to make us all feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we were talking about, when we talk about love" (7), Herb informs the group. The group continues drinking the gin, causing more anger and confusion to arise. After Herb tells the long tale of Anna and Henry, it seems as though Herbs views about there only being spiritual love have strengthened. The story leaves Herb feeling depressed, leaving the reader believing that he is afraid he will never find the kind of love that Anna and Henry have. As Herb leaves to freshen up, Terri finishes the gin and begins weeping due to the fact that Herb is depressed. She begins reminiscing about Carl, " She picked up her glass. ' Here's to you guys,' she said. ' Here's to all of us.' She drained the glass, and the ice clicked against her teeth. ' Carl, too,' she said, and put her glass back on the table. ' Poor Carl'" (18).

While Terri is weeping, the reader can see that Nick, too, is drunk, and we begin to see more of the truth in his relationship with Laura. " Slowly and with an effort, I turned to look at her" (19). We don't quite know what his view of " true love" is, although he seems to believe his relationship with Laura is very close. " Laura raised her eyes to mine then. Her look was

penetrating, and my heart slowed. She gazed into my eyes for what seemed a long time, and then she nodded. That's all she did, the only sign she gave, but it was enough" (19). This moment between Nick and Laura seems to show Laura's true feelings. She began the story blushing while she talked about Nick's and her relationship, but evolved to her giving him a simple head nod, showing Laura's uncertainty about their relationship.

Alcohol is a key element in this story for showing the eventual confusion of the characters' views on love. They begin the story sober and seemingly satisfied with their relationships but, as they become more intoxicated, the characters become more unsure of themselves and their partners. Laura seems to become more confused about the status of her relationship with Nick as the story goes on, although Nick appears to be head-over-heels while he knows their relationship is fragile. Herb believes that love is based on a spiritual connection, and becomes depressed from the lack of spiritual love in his life. While Herb is depressed about his lack of spiritual love, Terri is depressed by the lack of physical love in her relationship. She believes that Carl's way of love was the " climax" of true love. Carver ends the story when the sun sets and the characters run out of gin, symbolising the emptiness and lack of love in their lives.