

A thematic analysis of raymond carver's neighbors



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A glimpse into the lives led by other people may give insights on what makes them tick, what makes them appear the way they do. More often, it is in the nuances and details that one may observe a greater truth, rather than the manner by which people choose to present themselves. In Raymond Carver's 1988 short story, "Neighbors", a married couple is given the chance to discover and evaluate the lives of their relatively well-off neighbors through a collection of information that are not necessarily meant to be exposed.

The story vividly demonstrates how the couple's findings result in a main theme: the claim of power. Albeit temporary, this gives the couple an opportunity to control their neighbors through the discovered details, a concept potent enough to fill a void in their own relationship. Unlike many of Carver's stories, "Neighbors" includes characters with names, and complete at that. Bethea (2002) discussed Carver's penchant for naming—or not naming—characters, which relates to his assignment of the characters' relevance and degree of power, and in this particular story the names somehow refer to their economic status.

Power is more greatly alluded to in the name Stone, the rich neighbors, than the next-door Millers. This is confirmed in the description of the Stones' lifestyle, which is described as "always going out for dinner, or entertaining at home, or traveling about the country", which equates with the Millers' perception that "the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life" (Carver 86). At once the reader is alerted to the difference in living standards of the two couples, and this sets the tone for the events that take place.

The first and most important transference of power from the Stones to the Millers was the entrustment of the literal and figurative key to the formers' home and lives, with the objective of having the latter care for their cat and the plants. This reveals the dynamics present between the two couples, which is a combination of trust and submission to command, all in the context of friendly relations. At the start, Bill appears to have some expectations regarding this activity, as he "took a deep breath as he entered the Stones' apartment" (Carver 87).

His succeeding actions, including taking Harriet's pills and drinking the Chivas Regal—both representing 'sexual' concepts—seem to give him a significant amount of confidence. This newfound power connects itself with his wife, as they indulge in a heightened level of sexuality apparently not usual in their relationship. The next foray of Bill into the Stones' home exemplifies the addictive nature of power: a taste is never enough.

As he tries on the Stones' clothing, the image created is not simply that of wanting to see how they looked like on him, but rather an attempt at living life vicariously through someone's else's experiences. Because the Stones represent power, Bill's actions place him literally in their shoes. With Arlene entering the Stones' herself without Bill—they never go together—it is clear how the couple sees the activity as both a source of power and an aphrodisiac, which they obviously are at a lack.

Echoing the theme of Carver's story "Collectors" (Bethea 2002), Bill and Arlene Miller function as collectors of life's debts; the opportunities and chances that had eluded them and landed generously onto the laps of others

are now available for their own use. Their discovery of certain pictures sealed the proverbial deal of power, stated succinctly as Arlene mused that “maybe they won’t come back,” (Carver 92). Following the sexual implications of previous discoveries, the pictures may have been of the Stones’ compromising acts.

At this point the Millers are triumphant in their illusion of power, until they realize that the key is left inside the house. The key, the be-all and end-all of the new life the couple believed they could have, was no longer in their hands. As the story ends with Bill and Arlene as “ They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves” (93), the emotions of guilt and regret come forth. The couple is now threatened with their own reality, of the Stones coming back to reclaim their lives, and the lost chance at power.

While “ Neighbors” is classic Carver in simplicity, leanness, and profundity, the use of sexuality is uncommon in most of his stories. But the implication of such is essential in portraying the issue of power between people, because sex is often used to symbolize power relations. The intoxicating effect of power and control thus manifested itself in the Millers’ sex life, and this, apparently, is what they need. Their description of being a “ happy couple” (Carver 86) implies their simple living than contentment and satisfaction; in fact, they often “ talked about it... in comparison with the lives of their neighbors” (86).

Because they could not match the Stones in terms of living standards and frivolity, they seem to feel inferior and incomplete—thus the chance to live like their neighbors puts them at par with the Stones. The power that is

handed over to the Millers blurred their sense of propriety, even delving into conclusions that they would be able to take over the Stones' charmed lives. But like everything achieved through improper means, power has a way of slipping out of one's grasp; this is evident in the experience of Bill and Arlene, whose task is to merely look after their neighbors' home.