



# Raymond Carver's "Vitamins" and the Discourses of the Vietnam War

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Received: 21-02-2014

Accepted: 25-03-2014

Published: 01-07-2014

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.3n.4p.162

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.3n.4p.162>

## Abstract

By integrating the discourses of the Vietnam War into the texture of his short story "Vitamins," Raymond Carver would like to emphasize that the war was not only fought outside the United States. The present paper is an attempt to show how Carver connects the mechanics of the battlefield to the discourses of similar kind present in the individual and social spheres of the latter part of the twentieth century in America – a view consistent with Carver's interest in drawing attention to the contextual motives behind his characters' moods and actions. Providing an understanding of both Carver's short narrative and the period in which it was written and received, this paper investigates the various clashes of the story's characters within the broader social conflicts surrounding the issues of poverty, racism, and sexism.

**Keywords:** Carver, "Vitamins," America, Vietnam, discourse, context, conflict (clash), working class, race, sexism

## 1. Introduction

Started in 1954 as a civil war between the Communist forces of the North and the non-Communist army of the South, the Vietnam War eventually ended with the defeat of the latter group in 1975. Although America's intervention in Vietnam, with the aim of preventing the development of Communism in Southeast Asia, began in the fifties, Vietnam caught more attention between 1965 and 1973 when U.S. soldiers directly fought in the country (when people in the West talk about the Vietnam War, they usually mean this eight-year period). In no time, America's direct involvement threw the nation into chaos. When the Republican government ordered thousands of young men to fight in the war, some people rejected the required participation in the military. To show their disapproval, protesters demonstrated in the streets, took over office buildings, and broke up government meetings. Americans' opposition even grew more rapidly after President Nixon sent soldiers into Vietnam's neighboring countries.

The Vietnam War also seriously endangered America's economy, especially during the tight years of the 1970s. Goods needed for the warfare grew rare at home, making prices rise more quickly. At the same time, the quantity and quality of public welfare plans, which normally target people from lower classes, were greatly affected. According to the historian Richards (2010), "Health-care, education, and public aid programs begun in the 1960s received less government funding in the 1970s because vast sums of money went to the military" (p. 52).

No longer able to fight their costly war, U.S. politicians finally decided to withdraw from Vietnam in 1973. Interestingly, upon the end of America's involvement, there began an evident public silence in the country about the Vietnam War and all its related issues. As this war was the only defeat in America's history, it seemed that everybody had agreed to forget about the shame and pain the disaster had caused. "Vietnam Comes Home," a 1979 *Time* article, affirms this silence: "There appeared to be a willful repression of the nation's longest war. ... The forgetfulness amounted almost to national amnesia" (Morrow). However, Americans could not ignore such an important historical incident forever. Near the end of the seventies, the silence was broken here and there; and finally at the beginning of the eighties, when the media, books, and films started to treat the subject more openly, the Vietnam War turned into a topic of cultural representation. Around the same period of time, Raymond Carver was gaining his widest recognition in the United States. Although Carver did not himself fight in Vietnam, he has written a few literary pieces which establish strong links with the topic. The most significant of these works is "Vitamins" as it was published in 1983 in the author's renowned short-story collection *Cathedral*.

"Vitamins" is the story of its unnamed narrator-protagonist, a low-paid hospital janitor-cleaner, and his wife Patti, the head of a small group of girls who sell vitamins to people door to door. The narrative can be divided into two sections: the first part, which happens in the young couple's home, mainly deals with the domestic sphere (a familiar

environment in Carver's fiction); the second, which mostly occurs at a bar in town, is of a more public nature. In both of these sections, Carver depicts struggles at various levels: within the characters themselves, among the characters, and between the characters and their environment. A close analysis of the short story reveals that all these struggles tend to intersect with the larger social discourses surrounding the topic of the Vietnam War in the American 1970s and 1980s. Although critics like Campbell (1992) have already confirmed that beneath Carver's so-called plain narratives, there is "a keen literary interpretation of a particular time and place" (p. x), no piece of criticism has yet focused on "Vitamins" in relation to the era in which America was involved in Vietnam.

## 2. Discussion

Before anything, Carver's clever title "Vitamins," which plays with "Vietnam," forms the story's first association to the war. As a word, "vitamin" commonly suggests positive things like proper nourishment and health improvement; however, what the reader soon gets to know in the course of the story is that there is nothing wholesome or promising about either its characters or its events. This ironic side of the story helps communicate Carver's dark opinion of the war more effectively.

The narrator of "Vitamins" begins his narration in this way: "I had a job and Patti didn't. I worked for a few hours a night for the hospital. It was a nothing job. ... After a while, Patti wanted a job. She said she needed a job for her self-respect. So she started selling multiple vitamins door to door" (p. 85). This introductory paragraph sets the tone for the rest of the story which is actually the account of this couple's working-class lives.

A good deal of the narrator's account in the first section of "Vitamins" narrates the troubles Patti and her coworkers have to face in their low-paid, unstable jobs. Unlike the narrator, who appears unable to understand his own somehow similar situation, the author's portrayal of Patti shows that this character is actually aware of the emptiness of her days. A few pages into the story, Patti expresses her frustration in the failure of her dreams: "Vitamins. ... For shit's sake! ... I mean, when I was a girl, this is the last thing I ever saw myself doing. Jesus, I never thought I'd grow up to sell vitamins. Door-to-door vitamins. This beats all. This really blows my mind. ... This is hard.... This life is not easy, any way you cut it. ... I don't have any relief. There's no relief!" (p. 90). Not long afterwards, Patti explains the state of her unpromising career as being near "ground zero," an image indirectly connecting the setting of the story with a battleground:

"She [i.e. Donna, one of Patti's salesgirls] made a little sale two days ago. That's all. That's all that any of us has done this week. It wouldn't surprise me if she quit. I wouldn't blame her," Patti said. "If I was in her place, I'd quit. But if she quits, then what? Then I'm back at the start, that's what. Ground zero. Middle of winter, people sick all over the state, people dying, and nobody thinks they need vitamins. I'm sick as hell myself." (p. 91)

Scholars of working-class studies have often mentioned the similarities between fighting in a war and working in a low-class job. Appy (1993), for example, observes that both soldiers and workers do "the nation's 'dirty work' ... with little compensation" (p. 7). Like war, the poverty associated with low-paying jobs may cause individuals to lose their self-esteem and other people's respect. The issue of physical danger in both is also of great importance. People normally think that the most hazardous employment a person can have is being a soldier; however as Appy confirms, accidents occurring in the nonstandard environment of U.S. industrial workplace claimed far more lives during the period the country's troops were fighting in Vietnam (Ibid.).

According to Appy (1993), "Vietnam, more than any other American war in the twentieth century, perhaps in our history, was a working-class war. ... Roughly 80 percent (of the 2.5 million young Americans who served in the war) came from working-class and poor backgrounds" (p. 6). Carver's referencing of Vietnam within "Vitamins," a story with exclusively working-class characters, proves him to be aware of the Vietnam War as an overwhelmingly working-class battle. Indirectly alluding to the sociopolitical context of the war in his short story, Carver acknowledges the incident as a combat predominantly fought and suffered by the American youth from the lower rungs of the economic ladder. This inclusion of the Vietnam War in a narrative about the predicaments of lower class people finally reveals the author's concern for, and criticism of, the class oppression present in the context of the U.S. society of the time – a fact in which, in particular, the country's Republican government was not interested.

What should be noted here is that the war-induced poverty and inequality in America did not trouble Americans only during the time of the battle; these problems continued to affect the lives of those citizens who had to live with the war's aftermath in the coming years (including the period in which "Vitamins" was published). In the last year of President Carter's administration (i.e. 1981), for instance, the country's social and economic status was even worse than the time he came to power. As the historian Brill (2010) comments on this period, people were facing "the greatest rise in prices for all goods – in thirty-three years. Unemployment was soaring too. ... The shaky economy offered low-paid workers barely enough to feed their families" (pp. 5, 8).

Within such a context, Carver's "Vitamins" gives its readers an understanding of an American working-class community under siege in what is best described by Cowie and Boehm (2006) as "a guerilla war at home and abroad" (p. 354). The point that makes Carver's short story special in this regard, however, is the fact that it was among a few of the popular cultural productions of the eighties which managed to seriously analyze the larger sociopolitical context of the Vietnam War. This literary achievement becomes more noticeable when we realize that the dominant rhetoric of the Reagan era (1981-89) only encouraged those discourses which treated positive or, at most, neutral sides of the war, such as the bravery of U.S. soldiers.

Going back to the short story, we realize that the decline of Patti's vitamin business symbolically mirrors this character's disappointment with her marital relations. Although the narrative does not reveal that Patti is aware of her husband's infidelity, the narrator's indifference to her needs is one of Patti's constant complaints besides job dissatisfaction:

"Nobody's buying vitamins. That's what I'm telling you. Didn't you hear me?" ... "I'm my only customer," she said. "I think taking all these vitamins is doing something to my skin. Does my skin look okay to you? Can a person get overdosed on vitamins? I'm getting to where I can't even take crap like a normal person. ... You don't care if I take vitamins. That's the point. You don't care about anything." (pp. 91, 92)

As the critic Fachard puts it, what Patti actually finds in her husband is merely a "deaf ear" (2001, p. 6), a fact that connects the story's theme of deafness to the cut ear which literally appears later in the second half of the narrative.

In an early sign of the narrator's infidelity, the very first paragraph of "Vitamins" discloses that the man often skips out the hospital to go "drinking with the nurses" (p. 85). Later, a few pages into his narration, while emphasizing having "the hots for Donna [(Patti's coworker and best friend)]," the narrator recounts a drunken seducing scene in which he got Donna "into a little embrace" during a Christmas party at his house (p. 89). The main confirmation of the narrator's cheating, however, comes in the second part of the story when he visits a night bar with Donna without Patti knowing. The interesting point here is that although Donna claims to be Patti's friend, she does not bother to think of her relationship with the narrator as betraying Patti. Like love, friendship proves not to have true meaning and solidity in this short story. Perhaps what Carver wants to convey in "Vitamins" is that when people are struggling for the basics in their lives, there is not much room left for ethics. (Later in this paper, we will see how the narrator's behavior toward women could be interpreted in relation to the masculine mindset of American soldiers in Vietnam.)

The loose association of the first part of "Vitamins" with the Vietnam War, which is mostly implied through the characters' use of military vocabulary, is developed further in the second half of the story this time through some direct talk of the war. As mentioned above, the second section deals with the narrator's date with Donna. Before going to Donna's apartment "to finish things" (p. 95), the couple go to have a few drinks at "Off-Broadway," an African-American after-hours jazz bar owned and run by a black man called Khaki (another verbal reference to war). As the name Off-Broadway suggests, the public bar the couple visit turns into a stage, an opportunity for Carver to dramatize his characters and their clashes within the broader social conflicts surrounding poverty, racism, and sexism in America during and right after the Vietnam War.

Literary critics have often talked about "Carver's fondness for creating a feeling of threat" in his writing (Campbell, 1992, p. 60). When the narrator and Donna enter the bar's parking lot, the author's imagery starts to build up a sense of racial unease, exploiting the myth of "white America's fear of the black male" (Ibid.): "Three spades were up against an old Chrysler that had a cracked windshield. They were just lounging, passing a bottle in a sack. They looked us over" (p. 94). (Here notice the racist epithet "spade" for "African-Americans," which further fuels the racial fear; the word derives from the Italian *spada* and Latin *spatha*, meaning the "sword.") Then comes the narrator's description of the place as he mentions the violence which erupts in the bar from time to time, indirectly associating the setting of the story with the unsafe, menacing atmosphere of a battle: "Now and then a spade hit a spade in the head with a bottle. A story went around once that somebody had followed somebody into the Gents and cut the man's throat while he had his hands down pissing" (pp. 92-93). The proprietor of the Off-Broadway is also depicted as someone who always watches out for trouble: "Khaki was a big spade with a bald head that lit up weird under the fluorescents. He wore Hawaiian shirts that hung over his pants. I think he carried something inside his waistband. At least a sap, maybe [(sap is any leather-covered hand weapon)]. If somebody started to get out of line, Khaki would go over to where it was beginning" (p. 93).

Despite all this, since he has never witnessed any trouble himself, the narrator takes Donna to the bar. While they are sitting at a table in a booth "squeezing and patting" (p. 95), Benny, an acquaintance of the narrator, approaches the couple, also bringing along his drunken friend Nelson: "'I want you to meet Nelson,' Benny said. 'He just back from Nam today. This morning. He here to listen to some of these good sounds. He got on his dancing shoes in case'" (p. 96). This black soldier just back from Vietnam, instantly pays considerable attention to the white couple he meets. He looks and speaks as if he is able to see through them. The way Carver purposely has the narrator talk of Nelson depicts the black man as a preying animal: "This big spade had little red eyes.... He seemed to want to place me from somewhere. He studied me. Then he let loose a rolling grin that showed his teeth" (pp. 95, 96). It does not take long for Nelson to recognize that the narrator is having an illicit affair with Donna: "'You, Nelson said to me. 'You with somebody else, ain't you? This beautiful woman, she ain't your wife. I know that. But you real good friends with this woman. Ain't I right?'" (p. 97). In an attempt to divert attention away from his relationship with Donna, the narrator asks Nelson, "Is all that shit about Vietnam true we see on the TV?" (Ibid.). However, Nelson, "whose aggressive instinct has not yet undergone domestication" (Fachard, 2001, p. 7), ignores the question and continues to embarrass the narrator by suggesting that his wife is most probably occupied with her own lover at the same time. He even goes further and harasses Donna by offering to pay the couple for sexual favors from Donna (i.e. fellatio). Unwilling and unable to defend the woman she was kissing a few minutes ago, the narrator is paralyzed with fear of Nelson's intimidating presence, feeling a general numbness in his body: "I couldn't taste the whiskey. I couldn't taste anything. ... My legs were crazy" (pp. 97, 100).

Nelson's violating behavior in "Vitamins" as well as the humiliation to which Donna is subjected can make some external allusions. When read within its historical context of soldiers' life at battle, Nelson's "wanting virility," whose

obscenity, Fachard (2001) believes, makes it "synonymous with aggressivity" (p. 3), turns out to be more meaningful. In his study of the Vietnam War, Appy (1993) maintains that "many soldiers perceived and rationalized their brutalization" of others by taking Vietnam as a "wilderness beyond ... civilization" (p. 252). Connecting this observation to the name Off-Broadway (notice the "Off" part), one can conceive of Khaki's bar as a far-flung war zone which validates any type of aggression.

As the story progresses, Nelson's belligerent behavior relates the racial conflicts already played out in the bar with the Vietnam conflicts more forcefully. Continuing to offend the narrator, Nelson says, "I just teasing you. I ain't done any teasing since I left Nam. I teased the gooks some" (p. 98). "Gook" is a derogatory term for Asians used by American soldiers during the war in Vietnam. The implication of what Nelson says here is that to him, the white narrator is just another gook – an insinuation which brings the racist attitude of the Vietnam War into the clash in the bar.

As we saw above in Nelson's treatment of Donna, Carver is ready to combine the racial issues of "Vitamins" with the sexual discourses of the war in Vietnam. The narrator's marital betrayal, Nelson's unashamed proposition to Donna and his remarks about the narrator's wife all suggest the ways in which gender and sexuality were ruthlessly manipulated during the Vietnam War. Emphasizing the connection between sexism and war, Appy (1993) observes that "the model of male sexuality offered as a military ideal in boot camp was directly linked to violence." In such an ill picture of soldiering, as Appy continues, "ironic linking of guns and penises" had turned sexuality into a metaphor for killing (p. 102). At the same time, the misogyny fostered in soldiers by their military training should not be forgotten either. With all that context in mind, Nelson's bold effort to receive sexual favors from Donna could be interpreted as Carver's authorial extension of the sexual abuse of Vietnamese women by American soldiers during the war, a process in which a woman was brutally turned into an object.

At a comparable level to Nelson's behavior, the narrator's relationship with Donna in which, according to Fachard, he equally "reduce[s] her to a sexual object" (2001, p. 4), helps intensify the story's theme of sexism. Resulting from "his non-recognition of needs rather than sexual," the narrator "confesses to be an indifference to any other dimension in [Donna's] life" (Ibid.): "I said, 'What are you going to do?' But I didn't care. Right then she could have died of a heart attack and it wouldn't have meant anything" (p. 101). This scene actually happens near the end of the narrative when the incident in the bar has extinguished the couple's sexual desire. In Fachard's words, now that "[Donna] does not fulfill the sole function [the narrator] assigns to a woman. ... [She] has ceased to exist for him" (2001, p. 4).

However, these are not the only signs of sexism and objectification of women in "Vitamins." Very early in the story, the narrator's description of the group of girls who work for Patti is indicative of the man's objectifying attitude toward women:

Sometimes a girl just disappeared in the field, sample case and all. She'd hitch a ride into town, then beat it. But there were always girls to take her place. Girls were coming and going in those days. Patti had a list. Every few weeks she'd run a little ad in *The Pennysaver*. There'd be more girls and more training. There was no end of girls. (p. 86)

In addition to these statements, during the party at the narrator's house, Carver includes a scene which is quite telling. When Sheila, one of Patti's "girls," gets drunk and passes out in the middle of the living room, the girl is unbelievably dealt with like an unwanted object: "Patti and I and somebody else lugged her out to the back porch and put her down on a cot and did what we could to forget about her" (p. 87). After the party, when Sheila wakes up to see she has broken a finger while falling down drunk, she is horrified to discover that she has been treated with such lack of feeling:

She said she had this headache that was so bad it was like somebody was sticking wires in her brain. ... And she was sure her little finger was broken. ... She bitched about us letting her sleep all night with her contacts in. She wanted to know didn't anybody give a shit. She brought the finger up close and looked at it. She shook her head. She held the finger as far away as she could and looked some more. It was like she couldn't believe the things that must have happened to her that night. (Ibid.)

But Sheila and her coworker Donna are not the only characters of the story who are diminished in their womanhood. Any female in relation with the narrator has to "confront his inability to see [her] as anything but object" (Fachard, 2001, p. 5). This man's treatment of his wife, in particular, is noteworthy in this regard, as Patti seems to have decided to get a job to compensate for the "self-respect" she loses in her relationship with him. In a scene which is perhaps Carver's most obvious portrayal of his narrator's reductionist vision of the function of women, after the man has made out with Donna without having the opportunity to take her, he is shown quenching his lust on the body of his drunken, sleeping wife: "I thought some more about Donna. I finished the drink. I took the phone off the hook and headed for the bedroom. I took off my clothes and got in next to Patti. I lay for a while, winding down. Then I started in. But she didn't wake up. Afterwards, I closed my eyes" (p. 89).

Going back to the story's more direct links with the Vietnam War, the most concrete thing from Vietnam in "Vitamins" is a cut human ear "hooked up to a key chain" (p. 99) circulating in a silver case around the narrator's table in Khaki's bar. This dried-up ear, which has "traveled halfway around the world to be on this table tonight," has been taken "off one of them little dudes" by Nelson (pp. 100, 98). "He couldn't hear nothing with it no more. I wanted me a keepsake," boasts Nelson (p. 100). Such shocking talismans, according to Appy (1993), were taken by Vietnam soldiers as objects of revenge or psychological warfare, or merely for sadistic purposes (p. 265). Carver attributes symbolic significance to the ear of the story. Cut, dried-up, and chained, this ear is no longer a means of attention,

connection, and understanding. It is more "a symbol of people's unwillingness to listen or to hear other people," the critic Nessel observes (1995, p. 64). This ear could be seen as an emblem of the deafness outrageously demonstrated by politicians and military men during any time of war. Such a connection between the ear and war is verified by Carver critics like Abrahams (2007): "For Nelson, [the ear] is symbolic of the war he had fought.... It is a piece of that war which stands for the whole of it" (pp. 10-11).

Close to the end of the story, when Carver's narrator and his female companion finally decide to leave the bar to avert chaos, there comes another moment which ties the setting of the narrative to Vietnam. Disappointed that they have turned down his offer, Nelson shouts to the couple: "Whatever you do, it ain't going to help none!" (p. 100). This sentence draws a parallel between the characters' failure and that of the American forces abroad. Said by a soldier coming home from a lost war, these words encapsulate the pointless attempts of all the story's characters to improve their situations in life, whether it is by working low jobs, fighting a war, drinking, bragging, cheating, or even moving away (Note 1).

Near the end of "Vitamins," Carver includes a scene which implies that financial worries and job dissatisfaction lie at the root of his characters' problems. While the narrator and Donna are driving away from the bar, the former expresses his regret about the degrading encounter they had. Donna instead speaks of her regret at having turned Nelson down, as she is in desperate need of money: "'I could of used the money,' Donna said. ... 'It's true,' she said. 'I could of used the money.' She shook her head. 'I don't know,' she said. She put her chin down and cried" (p. 101). Through Donna, Carver acknowledges that self-respect comes secondary to survival. In his penetrating analysis of "Vitamins," Campbell (1992) describes the lives of the story's characters as being "empty, meaningless, oppressed by poverty and the pressures of trying to make ends meet" (p. 60). It seems that very much like war, poverty is able to debase individuals.

What should be borne in mind, however, is the fact that Carver's portrayal of poverty in "Vitamins," for the most part, remains upon its psychological rather than physical damage in working-class lives. Campbell goes on to say, "These characters are spiritually sick, beaten down by a life over which they have no control. Things are falling apart, and there are no vitamins [(no relief)] that will help" (Ibid.). Each of the characters of the narrative experiences a fall of some kind. Since these people are not able to ease their dismal plights, their personal and work relations continue to fall apart. When the protagonist returns home at the end of the story, he closes his narration with a final image of an inevitable fall: "I poured Scotch, drank some of it, and took the glass into the bathroom. I brushed my teeth. Then I pulled open a drawer. ... I couldn't take any more tonight. ... I knocked some stuff out of the medicine chest. Things rolled into the sink. 'Where's the aspirin?' I said. I knocked down some more things. I didn't care. Things kept falling" (p. 102).

### 3. Conclusion

Raymond Carver's portrait of working-class people in "Vitamins" overlaps with preoccupations central to the story's contemporaneous society in the second half of the twentieth century. Around the time when young working-class Americans were being wounded and killed far away in Vietnam, workers at home had to face the consequences of the battle. Through employing images of poverty in regard to the discourses of the Vietnam War, Carver's "Vitamins" invites criticism of both America's class relations and its pointless war abroad. In a similar mode, Carver also links the gender and race issues of his story to the Vietnam War on the one hand and to the class oppression present in the context of U.S. society on the other. By integrating the discourses of Vietnam into the texture of his short story, Carver would like to emphasize that the war was not only fought outside the United States. "Vitamins" then becomes an opportunity for Carver to dramatize his characters' clashes within the broader social conflicts surrounding poverty, racism, and sexism during and right after the period in which Americans fought in Vietnam.

Carver's multifaceted referencing of warfare in "Vitamins" turns war into a metaphor in the story, a metaphor creatively extended by the author to include three different but related layers: the characters' inner conflicts (over their anxiety, despair, responsibility, etc.), their clashes with each other (over gender and/or race), and their struggles with their environment (when it comes to making money, for example).

What makes Carver's short story special in its relation to the Vietnam War, however, is the fact that it was among a few of the popular cultural productions of the eighties which managed to seriously analyze the larger sociopolitical context of the war, as the dominant rhetoric of the era only encouraged discourses treating more neutral sides of the combat.

Another interesting point in "Vitamins" is that, unlike many of the representations of the Vietnam War in 1980s popular films and books which tended to move from outward conflicts to inward narratives of American individuals, Carver has taken the opposite direction: starting from limited personal accounts, "Vitamins" spirals outward toward interpretations of grander scale – a widening, outward-looking view consistent with Carver's interest in drawing attention to the contextual motives behind his characters' moods and actions.

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### Note

1. While Patti and her partner contemplate moving to Arizona, Sheila and Donna decide to quit their jobs to go to Portland.