

How less is more” in the American Minimalist Style: the Short Fiction of Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver

Boudjerida Messaouda ^{1/} University: University of Abdelhafid Boussouf -Mila, Algeria,
messaouda.boudjerida@centre-univ-mila

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Abstract:

The Minimalist style has long been disregarded by critics and scholars because it is believed to have minimal meaning or it is meaningless. In reality, writers of this new kind of style including Ernest Hemingway, its originator in American fiction, and Raymond Carver, his follower and a leader of the Minimalist Movement, rely on the laconic style to express “more” while they treat very important themes in their short stories. The current paper is an attempt to show how these two genius writers express their deep meaning through their minimalist styles by explaining the ideologies behind their adaptation of this kind of style and how they manipulate different literary techniques including understatement, figures of speech, omission, implication, dialogue, and epiphany to convey their themes and worldview. By so doing, the paper aims to disclose one of the most important styles in literary history, which is still unknown amongst Algerian teachers and students, with the aim of encouraging teachers to adopt it in their classrooms due to its simplicity and literariness which make learning literature more profitable and enjoyable.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, “Iceberg Theory,” the minimalist style, influence, short story.

ملخص:

لطالما تجاهل النقاد والعلماء أسلوب الأسلوب التبسيطي لأنه يعتقد أنه يحتوي على حد أدنى من المعنى أو أنه لا معنى له. في الواقع ، يعتمد كتاب هذا النوع الجديد من الأسلوب ، بما في ذلك إرنست همنغواي ، مبتكره في الرواية الأمريكية ، وريموند كارفر ، قائد حركة لأسلوب التبسيطي ، على الأسلوب المقتضب للتعبير عن “المزيد” أثناء تعاملهم مع موضوعات مهمة جدًا في قصصهم القصيرة. الدراسة الحالية هي محاولة لإظهار كيف يعبر هذان الكاتبان العبقريان عن معانيهما العميقة من خلال أساليبيهما المبسطة بشرح الأيديولوجيات الكامنة وراء تكيفهم مع هذا النوع من الأسلوب وكيف يتلاعبون بالتقنيات الأدبية المختلفة كالإغفال والتضمين والحوار ولحظة الإلهام للتعبير عن موضوعاتهم ورؤيتهم للعالم. من خلال القيام بذلك، يهدف المقال إلى الكشف عن أحد أهم الأساليب في التاريخ الأدبي ، والتي لا تزال غير معروفة بين المعلمين والطلاب الجزائريين ، وذلك بهدف تشجيع المعلمين على تبنيها في فصولهم الدراسية نظرًا لبساطتها وأدبيتها التي تجعل تعلم الأدب أكثر فائدة و متعة. الكلمات المفتاحية: إرنست همنغواي ، ريموند كارفر ، “نظرية الجبل الجليدي” ، الأسلوب البسيط ، التأثير ، القصة القصيرة.

^{1/} Corresponding author: Boudjerida Messaouda, e-mail address: messaouda.boudjerida@centre-univ-

1. Introduction:

People design things as “small” depending on physical size, duration, intensity, significance, quantity of the element composing it, and the simplicity of the structure. These different registers of perception share the notion of reduction. An art, which is principally based on the notion of reduction, is termed minimalist by critics and scholars. In other words, in its broadest sense, minimalism is used to describe any form of human experience whose elements have been reduced and simplified¹. More precisely, the term is used to denote, especially American movements in painting, sculpture, architecture and music which have emerged and flourished during the 1960s and 1970s, and have remained influential till the present day. These movements have provided basic elements for the development of the Minimalist Movement in literature in the late 1970s.

Although the minimalist literary style was understood differently by several critics and has received huge criticism from scholars and critics, it was able to hold a specific position in American literature due to the works of many minimalist writers. Despite the fact that the minimalist style has become well-known in the late 1970s and 1980s in American literature due to specific socio-historical reasons, its origins can be traced back to the writing of Ernest Hemingway. In this paper I intend to show how these two genius writers express their deep meaning through their minimalist styles by explaining the ideologies behind their adaptation of this kind of style and how they manipulate different literary techniques. By so doing, we hope to disclose one of the most important styles in literary history, which is still unknown amongst Algerian teachers and students, with the aim of encouraging teachers to adopt it in their classrooms due to its simplicity and literariness which make learning literature more profitable and enjoyable.

1. Ernest Hemingway's Aesthetic : the “Iceberg Theory”:

Although the minimalist short story as a distinct type was developed in the late 1970s and 1980s at the hands of the writers of the Minimalist Movement, the modernist writer, Ernest Hemingway is considered an innovator of the genre and an originator the minimalist short story. He was one of the earliest practitioners of the modernist short story along with his contemporaries of the “Lost Generation” writers. He emerged in the 1920s during which the First World War (1914-1918) hastened the process of change and unsettled the American society. Although, obviously, American life appeared to have improved, prosperity, technology, consumption, and mass culture seriously affected American people by disrupting their traditional values, beliefs, customs, and behaviors. It also led to the widespread of disorder, internal struggles, and fights. These changes led to the widespread of the alienation from a once-continuous historical past². In short, it is assumed that the 1920s became “the age of wonderful nonsense, and a time

of social hopelessness."³

Undeniably, his aesthetic emerged as a result of his interplay, interpretation, and transformation of the adapted techniques during his apprenticeship, especially his experience in journalism and his literary influences. By the time his collection *In Our Time* (1925) was published, Hemingway developed salient features of his minimalist writing. In the short story, the technique of omission plays a significant role in creating a complete narrative within a small space. In fact, Ernest Hemingway's aesthetic is, principally, based on his "Theory of Omission" in which he thinks that the writer can omit anything if he knows that the omitted part will strengthen the story and make people feel more than they understand, since they will involve their imagination to interpret and solve the ambiguities of the text. He first articulated his aesthetic theory in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), employing the metaphor of the iceberg to carry the weight of his argument after stating that "Prose is architecture, not interior decoration, and the Baroque is over" (*Death in the Afternoon* 191)⁴. Ernest Hemingway developed an art in which he concentrated on the intention of losing. This art, which focuses on omitting information to strengthen the text instead of depriving it, becomes known as "the art of losing"⁵. While attempting to master this art, Hemingway explains how his fiction works while considering the acquired knowledge of a writer's life experience is the hard earned fuel of his fiction:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing. A writer who appreciates the seriousness of writing so little that he is anxious to make people see he is formally educated, cultured or well-bred is merely a popinjay.⁶

Hemingway's "Iceberg Theory" deals with the basic principle that "less is more." In other words, instead of stating things obviously, he relies on the technique of implications, symbolism, dialogue, and repetition to convey his themes. Critics, like Paul Smith in "Hemingway's Early Manuscripts: The Theory and Practice of Omission" and Susan Beegel in "Hemingway's Craft of Omission: Four Manuscript Examples," demonstrate that, as a highly conscious writer, Hemingway developed the "Iceberg Theory" in order to justify and ground his revolutionary minimalist style⁷. Beegel's little book is the most interesting and comprehensive work which details Hemingway's "Theory of Omission" by showing how he



transmuted the material of his life and literary experiences into art. In clarifying his process of revision, she notes that it "was principally a business of omission, of discovering the story in the stream of consciousness, and eliminating the personal material leading to and sometimes from it."⁸

In concluding her study, Beegel points out to the five categories of material "left out". The first category is material from his personal experience which includes not only his biography, but also material from his real or imagined fabula. The second category is represented by those experiences that may affect the author's emotions, feelings and mind, but they are never mentioned. Feelings are the third category of the omitted knowledge. In Hemingway's stories there is always a description of the actions and objects which represent the "tip of the iceberg," while characters' emotions are left beneath the surface of things. On this last point, Beegel writes: "The underwater part of the iceberg is the emotion, deeply felt by reader and writer alike, but represented in the text solely by its 'tip'—[what Eliot termed] the objective correlative"⁹. Hence, the reader is assigned an active role to discover the omitted emotions by interpreting the actions. Hemingway learned this technique from the poetry of Ezra Pound and T.S Eliot. The fourth category of Hemingway's omission Beegel cites are moments that emerge from his use of irony. Hemingway employs irony which is based on omission since it is "dependent on the reader's recognition that the experience expressed in the text is at odds with other, omitted experience"¹⁰. These categories are common in fiction. Nevertheless, Hemingway's uniqueness is crystal clear in the final category which is the relationships between his technique of omission and his thematic interest in "nothingness." Harold Bloom refers to this kind of omission as 'the Real Absence' in Hemingway's" fiction. Being distinct and important, this "thematic omission" is considered by Beegel the "significant omission at the heart of the universe." She observes Hemingway's special interest in the theme of "nothing" by writing: "When everything is left out, nothing remains, and like 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,' Hemingway's archetypal story of 'nada,' much of his writing is ultimately about nothing" or about nothingness."¹¹ On the basis of Beegel's idea, Lamb believes that omission in Hemingway's story can be classified into three types: "a minor form" which is related to his inclination towards concision, a form in which the writer mentions only a piece of knowledge and implies the other, and "a major form" which is linked to and derives from his method of 'objectivity' or 'impressionism.'¹²

In 1958 interview with George Plimpton, Hemingway restated his "Iceberg Theory" and explained the basics of its tenets: "I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story"¹³. Though the process is performed in different steps, the writers have the same goal and express the same thing. To put it otherwise, "the raked fire" and the "iceberg" are equivalent metaphors,

in that the shortness of the story is emphasized and was treated as "positive"; the fact of omitting and eliminating information strengthens the narrative¹⁴. To put it otherwise, Hemingway's truth is primarily related to his recreation of the emotional experience of facts in his readers and this 'truth' is considered valuable only in the terms created in his fiction.¹⁵

Ernest Hemingway is one of the most famous writers who were associated with writing about war in the early 20th century. Indeed, the writer himself experienced several wars during his lifetime both as a direct participant and as a journalist covering wars, and in other capacities. Thus, he wrote dispatches from innumerable frontlines and used war as a backdrop for many of his most memorable works. Consequently, he produced a fiction with highly-crafted literary techniques which highlight the complexity of his themes.¹⁶ Thomas Putnam, director of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, maintained that, being affected by their war experience, American modernist writers lost faith in the central institutions of Western civilization including the institution of literature itself. As a reaction to Victorian literature, which was prone to elaborate style, Hemingway wrote the American sentence by creating a new and distinct style "in which meaning is established through dialogue, through action, and silences—a fiction in which nothing crucial—or at least very little—is stated explicitly."¹⁷ Though he is not considered a minimalist writer himself, his fiction paved the way for the emergence of a generation of writers including Raymond Carver, the leader of the Minimalist Movement in American literary history.

2. Raymond Carver's Literary Minimalism:

Raymond Carver (1938-1988) was born in Oregon logging town. His personal background is often reflected in his characters. Living in the Pacific Northwest, where many of his stories are set, he married and fathered two children before he reached twenty. He and his first wife worked at a series of unskilled jobs and moved frequently between small towns. He "picked tulips, pumped gas, swept hospital corridors, swabbed toilets, [and] managed an apartment complex." His first wife also "worked for the phone company, waited tables, [and] sold a series of book digests door-to-door." Ray Anello observes that "of all the writers at work today, Carver may have [had] the most distinct vision of the working class."¹⁸ In his essay "Fires" (1982), Carver described how the limitations placed on him by fatherhood influenced the tone and format of his writing. In justifying his choice of the short story and poetry genre, he claimed that his social conditions forced him concentrate on them in order to gain time and money. Like his characters, he experienced failing marriages, poverty, and alcoholism. Interestingly, Raymond Carver gained great success through the publication of three major collections— *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1967), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), and *Cathedral* (1983)—and the volume of selected stories, *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). Adam Meyer claims that through these works Carver "places himself firmly 'in the realist tradition'.¹⁹ His stories are in the tradition of Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), Gustave Flaubert

(1821-1880), and Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) who is "the father of minimalist writing."²⁰

Being problematic when applied to literary texts, it is not astonishing that the term "minimalism" has received no universal or consensus definition by critics and scholars²¹. Nevertheless, it is commonly known as the "aesthetic of exclusion"(Boswell "Minimalism"). Ann Beattie confirms that "minimalism resides in certain omissions."²² The glossary in the anthology *The Story and Its Writer* defines it as "A literary style exemplifying economy and restraint."²³ Given the fact that the term itself is difficult to define, scholars, who are interested to write about minimalist stories encounter many difficulties and choose to deal with certain aspects common to all minimalist stories. To exemplify, Linsey Abrams points out to the ambiguous and complicated nature of minimalist literature when she writes, "Minimalist fiction, at its best, draws resonance from simple understandings, accumulated into structures where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. At its worst, those same simple understandings are presented linearly, rendering them simplistic, if not inauthentic."²⁴ According to her, minimalist literature simplifies their styles in order to make them more complicated and difficult to be understood.

The term "minimalism" is used not only to denote an understated style, but also it refers to an assembly of aspects and characteristic that are attributed to the short story since both minimalism and the short story are governed by "an aesthetic of exclusion"(Hallett, "Minimalism")²⁵. In comparing the minimalist short story and the genre of the short story itself, Hallett insists that both of them rely on figurative language and symbolic association to convey their meaning by noting: "as a literary style minimalism is as the short story does—at the most basic level and in a leaner format. Both are compact, condensed, and contracted in design; both are especially dependent on figurative language and symbolic associations as channels for expanded meaning."²⁶ Moreover, in delineating the important role of the reader in the construction of text's meaning and in finding the "rich" and the lasting meaning by interpreting the figurative and the symbolic language of the text, Hallett clarifies: "At first reading, many minimal narratives can seem internally disconnected, the sentences detached from one another, the ending as much a beginning as the first line; but when the stories are read closely, oblique references and dim designs combine into a rich texture of trope—exposing a pattern of meaning within the symbolic structure" (*Minimalism and the Short Story* 12)²⁷. In other words, she advocates that the reader must make a close reading of the text in order to discover patterns of meaning exposed in "the oblique references and dim designs" in their attempt to understand what the author is suggesting in his story. After discovering the unique patterns, the reader has to combine them with his real life experiences and his background knowledge including the literary one so as to find out a "rich" meaning of the text.²⁸

Interestingly, in this style, what is unstated is more important than what is stated. Amy Hempel, an original short story writer to whom the term "minimalist" was conferred, describes it as follows: "A lot of

times what's not reported in your work is more important than what actually appears on the page. Frequently, the emotional focus of the story is some underlying event that may not be described or even referred to in the story.²⁹ Accordingly, the reader is, actively, engaged in the interpretation of the text by using his imagination and personal experience to fill in the empty spaces and infer from the clues given by the writers to make the story meaningful. What is presented for him resembles external reality, but the method of presentation suggests that there is more to say than the narrated details.³⁰ Moreover, Kim Herzinger, the editor of the *Mississippi Review*, focuses on the challenges the readers face while attempting to interpret and understand the minimalist text in his introduction to the 1985 Winter edition: "The reader of minimalist fiction is being asked to face the characters in the story the way we face people in the world, people who do not—in my experience at least—ordinarily declare their personal histories, political and moral attitudes, or psychological conditions for my profit and understanding."³¹ In other words, the characters of the minimalist stories emerge fully developed and without histories. Readers get to know them through their actions and words without being explicitly described by the writers.

Being interested in literary minimalism, Kim Herzinger sheds some light on what is called the "new fiction" in American literary history and tried to provide answers to some important questions such as what links these minimalist writers together, what separated them from the postmodernist writers of the sixties, if they were witnessing a realist revival, and what makes the work "minimalist" on the first place³². He asserts that there is a stable critical consensus in how minimalism in the American short story can be defined. Hence, he tried to make clear this consensus by outlining a brief and decisive definition of literary minimalism by stating: "Still, most critics, here and elsewhere, can generally agree as to the salient characteristics of "minimalist" fiction [...] "equanimity of surface, 'ordinary' subjects, recalcitrant narrators and deadpan narratives, slighness of story, and characters who don't think out loud."³³ A few pages later, Herzinger adds other traits to the list: compression, "aggressive lucidity," "spareness and cleanness, above all the obvious 'craftedness,'" and a "profound uneasiness with irony as a mode of presentation"³⁴.

In spite of the fact that minimalist writers have experienced with a variety of voices and method, their minimalist writing share certain characteristics. Critics have translated Herzinger's "salient characteristics" into several more precise elements in order to help readers specify whether a work of fiction is considered minimalist or not. The following list highlights what may be considered to be the most common and important elements of contemporary minimalist fiction: formally, writers avoid the use of elaborate rhetoric, but instead they rely on realistic dialogue and the behavior of the characters³⁵. They tend to use simple and unadorned language with the rejection of hyperbole; shorter sentence with few adjectives and when used not extravagant; repetition of words, phrases or ideas; stylistically sparse (punctuation, speaker tags, personal identifiers,... etc.) are often limited or omitted); heavy reliance on textual omissions (gaps),



so that the important action may take place outside the story or just at the beginning of the story; the use of abundant dialogue; a detached and even an absent narrator; showing not telling as a mode of narration; preference of the present tense; very few characters who are, generally, simple and middle class people; reticence towards the expression of the characters' thoughts and feelings; minimal action and slight plot which reveal more they resolve; open-ended conclusions; the tone is, generally, informal and familiar; the setting is domestic and "safe"); characters' silence, which is used as a form of communication, creates the ambiguity of the story.

Thematically, there is an accurate and realistic depiction of the everyday with an emphasis on contemporary common place subject matter such as love, failing marriages, disillusionment, unemployment and poverty³⁶. The late seventies was a time of realism as well. But this realism was not unaffected by the spirit of stylistic experimentation. The emergence of different labels, such as "ironic realism," "fantastic realism," "modern surrealism," and "experimental realism," demonstrated, as Raymond Carver commented, that writers were searching for new forms of realism to depict the essence of a world that "seemed to change gears and directions, along with its rules, everyday."³⁷

The minimalist writers were the leaders of the so called "dirty realist" school which focused on depicting the lives of American working- class (Marshal "20th-century")³⁸. Being realists, they were, certainly, in contradiction with most postmodern writers such as Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon. Raymond Carver thinks that the experiment of postmodernism "was crowned by so little success" since he believes that both content and technique should be given a credit³⁹. So, minimalist writers like Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie did not stick to the traditional double form-content, instead they created a new single format which enabled them to express reality at the surface. In other words, for them reality is a code and surface is reality (Stevenson 87)⁴⁰.

Hence, these writers pay attention to the external and leave out the rest to the reader. The minimalist writers are, generally, interested in writing as an act of communication in order to convey reality. Tobias Wolff, a minimalist writer, comments on this aesthetic mode of communication: "A good writer should make you feel as if he lived the story he is telling.... It is an artistic achievement to make someone feel they have had an encounter with reality, when what they have had an encounter with is a writer's imagination."⁴¹ The minimalist writers attempt to best achieve an authentic communication between the reader and the writer through their use of plain language; common language and the language of the real man and women.⁴²

Conclusion:

Hemingway's style which is based on the "Theory of the Iceberg" primarily deals with the basic principle that "less is more." In other words, he relies on the technique of implications, symbolism, dialogue,

and repetition to convey his themes and express his characters' emotional reality. Though he is not considered a "minimalist" writer, he is credited to have established the basic principles of literary minimalism which was developed by the Minimalist Movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Raymond Carver, the godfather of this movement also is based his style on the same principle which give the opportunity for the reader to contribute in the construction of the text's meaning. Finally, this minimalist style is worth of teaching in Algerian universities because it will contribute in increasing learners' critical thinking and imagination and develop their love for literary texts, thus improving their English language.

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