

Spring 2014

# A Changed Opinion on “A Small Good Thing”

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## Recommended Citation

Somasundaram, Sai '14, "A Changed Opinion on “A Small Good Thing”" (2014). *2014 Spring Semester*. Paper 2.  
<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/spring2014/2>

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Modern World Fiction

24<sup>th</sup> April 2014

Mrs. Micklo

### A Changed Opinion on “A Small Good Thing”

Suspense, surprise, shock, and awe are all parts of a great story, especially when intertwined together to keep the reader guessing until the last second. In Raymond Carver’s “A Small Good Thing”, the main characters go through a tragic story in which they come face to face with the vastness of the world, and the sincerity of human nature. When Scotty, the young boy who the story is centered around, is involved in an accident and hospitalized, his parents Howard and Ann, end up embarking on a journey to understand who is leaving them mysterious calls about their ailing son. Following the death of their son, Howard and Ann realize that their tormentor is a Baker with whom they placed an order for Scotty’s upcoming birthday. After confronting the Baker, Ann and Howard learn the truth behind the calls, as well as a bit of the Bakers past, allowing them to connect with the Baker on a much more human level. Personally, I enjoyed many parts of this story, especially with the twists in plot seen above, as well as the numerous hints of symbolism carried throughout the plot. Overall though, I ended up sympathizing with Ann throughout the story, especially as she lost her child- the light of her life. This changed to an extent after I read a critical review on the story. Although my overall enjoyment of the plot of “A Small Good Thing” by Raymond Carver remains unchanged, the viewpoint that I take towards the story has clearly changed towards one that sympathizes with the Baker over Ann due to a critical review by Mark Facknitz.

Throughout the story, Ann and Howard are characters that Carver wants you to sympathize with. When reading, I definitely fell into this trap of feeling bad for Ann just because of the hard emotional time she goes through. Perhaps it is society that has trained us to feel this way, but just as Ann and Howard realize their greatest fear, we become afraid for them, and transitively ourselves. After the death of Scotty, Ann talks to Howard. She says “Howard, he’s gone. He’s gone and now we’ll have to get used to that. To being alone”(Carver 399). This fear of being alone is one of the greatest that comes with death – something that definitely strikes the core of readers, something that everyone can relate to, no matter how young or old, no matter how familiar with death they are. In addition to being alone due to the death of their son, Howard and Ann also seem to slowly be isolated from the outside world, especially during their time in the hospital. The most noticeable of these events is the passage of time in which other people such as Dr. Francis seem to carry on their normal lives while Howard and Ann seem to be stuck in a period of grief and sorrow. As a combination of both the fear of being alone that Howard and Ann feel as well as the isolation that they see from the outside world, I formed a reasonable reaction- to feel sorrowful for Ann, seeing her in such an enfeebling position made my heart ache the first time I read the story.

Then I read a review by Mark Facknitz. My world was flipped upside down. After looking a little deeper into the story, Facknitz comments on the motivation and reasoning behind Ann’s anger. He says “The facts are plain, and the steps in her understanding of what Bakers can and cannot know are clear and logical. Her anger on the other hand is pure, and purifying. It is as physical and overpowering as the nausea that succeeds it” (Facknitz 292). When I first read the story, I was completely beside Ann during this scene, as she was in extreme anguish, but at the same time, one word that never came to mind was logical. I definitely saw anguish within Ann,

as well as revenge that translated into anger, but nothing that would make her decision logical. This quote showed how Ann very carefully took into consideration the events of the previous days in order to arrive at her conclusion that the Baker was at fault for the death of her son. One of the reasons that I sympathized with Ann was due to her seeming lack of logic when blaming the Baker. That sympathy is lost as soon as I realize that she has logically arrived at the conclusion to kill the Baker, something that Facknitz states above.

The changes in perception carry on in the story all the way to the end though. Once Ann confronts the Baker, she explains herself, threatening to kill the Baker all the while. Facknitz responds to this by saying that “through imperceptible and trivial dishonesties we create large lies that can only be removed by superhuman acts of self-assertion”(293). When responding to Ann’s brutal honesty during the confrontation, the Baker lowers his defenses by putting down the rolling pin, and clears places for both Howard and Ann at the table, telling them to take a seat and listen to what he says. When I first read the story, this was another situation in which I favored Ann, as the Baker was just a side character compared to Ann and all her emotions. This left me fairly unsurprised when the Baker actually had a relatable life of his own. Although only touching briefly on the issue, Facknitz’s criticism allowed me to realize that it was not Ann forgiving the Baker, but the Baker being able to control himself in the face of such immense accusations that demands sympathy of the reader. Without his significant act of self assertion, the story could have taken a much darker turn, but Carver cleverly allows for the Baker to be the type of person that can control himself in order to soothe Ann and Howard. This charisma that the Baker demonstrates showed his sorrow of his life to me, causing me to sympathize with him more than Ann in the moment.

The story of the Baker, as well as that of Ann and Howard ends on a sad note, but overall, I am led to favor one over the other. This is especially true when it comes to light that the Baker has lived a life of sadness all alone, compared to Ann who is new to the boat of loneliness. The Baker talks about the ovens in his bakery, and how they are “endlessly empty, and yet endlessly full ”(293). Carver’s use of metaphors to illustrate the future are only a few of the ways in which the Baker tells his own sad story, one that Facknitz is able to bring to the surface.

Overall, the minor observations that Facknitz made in his critical review of Carver’s story helped me to not only tackle the story from a different point of view, but to also sympathize with different characters, as unlikely as that may seem. The thought through process of Ann’s thoughts as well as the analysis of the actions of the Baker provided by Facknitz are a cause for a shift in perspective. This shift caused me to sympathize much more with the Baker in the end, compared to previously, where I favored Ann.

Works Cited

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Facknitz, Mark A.R. "'The Calm,' 'A Small, Good Thing,' And 'Cathedral': Raymond Carver And The Rediscovery Of Human Worth." *Studies In Short Fiction* 23.3 (1986): 287. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 25 Apr. 2014.