

## Sample response on Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*

The following sample response on Raymond Carver's short stories is based on three passages:

- in 'They're Not Your Husband', from 'He took his time ordering' to 'reached into his pocket', pp.20–1
- in 'Nobody Said Anything', from 'I saw George riding his bicycle' to 'I held that half of him', pp.45–6
- in 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?', from 'For their honeymoon' to 'a man named Mitchell Anderson', pp.165–6.

Page numbers refer to the Vintage edition of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* published in 2009.

## Introduction

The introduction immediately ‘plunges’ into one of the passages and picks up a strong visual image (the steelhead) as the basis for a discussion about the need for certainty. Criterion 3 is addressed by the views and values comments about the uncertain world inhabited by the characters.

Link from the passage to the text’s wider concerns.

The anxiety of the narrator in ‘Nobody Said Anything’, whose fragile world fragments as he watches his parents’ violent argument through the kitchen window, is temporarily alleviated as he holds onto a ‘gigantic summer steelhead’ – a tangible reminder of the more secure world of his early childhood. The illuminated ‘half fish, ‘silver under the porch light’, is the boy’s one certainty in the dark night of a confusing adult world. Carver’s insecure characters inhabit a meaningless and menacing world, and are overwhelmed by existential anguish as they struggle to find certainty and to know that the choices they make are valid.

## Paragraph 2

Paragraph 2 discusses the need for certainty mentioned in the introduction, referring in detail to passage 1 and maintaining the *coherence* of the response. Critical moments in the passage are analysed, showing why this is a *key passage* in the text and how it *contributes to an interpretation* (criterion 4). The close focus on Carver’s language analyses one of the *features* of the text, showing how it *contributes to an interpretation* (criterion 5). Brief references to another passage and another set story strengthen a point about character and increase the *relevance* and *plausibility* of the interpretation (criterion 1). The *views and values* comment at the end of the paragraph addresses criterion 3.

Comment about settings – one of the features of the text – and how they are relevant to the interpretation.

Like the child with the steelhead and the pathetic, obese man in ‘Fat’, Earl seeks reassurance through the attention and approval of others. Annoyed by a male customer’s derogatory comments about Doreen’s thighs, Earl badgers her to lose weight and then observes her as she works in a dreary, 24-hour coffee shop; this is typical of the settings inhabited by Carver’s characters and reflects the relentless tedium of their daily lives. As Earl watches, dramatic tension is created by the slow pace of the narrative, and emphasised by the drawn-out descriptions of seemingly unimportant details: ‘The man had finished eating and his plate was pushed to the side. The man lit a cigarette, folded the newspaper in front of him, and continued to read.’ Carver’s pared-down, minimalist style is quietly understated as Earl ‘sips his coffee and [waits] for the man to say something’; Carver evokes the commonplace but subtly suggests the pathos of ordinary people’s lives. The denial of these characters’ needs is a symptom of the alienation of the outsider in an uncaring and often hostile world.

Comment about narrative style and how it relates to the text’s construction of meaning.

## Paragraph 3

Paragraph 3 further develops the idea of 'the outsider', mentioned at the end of paragraph 2, enhancing the *coherence* of the response (criterion 2). A comparison between passages 1 and 3 and another set story ('Neighbors') strengthens a point about the character in passage 3, helping to make the discussion more *plausible* (criterion 1) as well as coherent. Close analysis of the language in the passage focuses on one of the *features* of the text, showing how it *contributes to an interpretation* (criterion 5). The *views and values* comment at the end of the paragraph (criterion 3) draws the discussion back to the notion of uncertainty mentioned in the introduction.

Although not one of Carver's weary, working-class battlers, Ralph is also an outsider. Like Earl, he is plagued by an insecurity which is linked to his wife's attractiveness to other men. While Earl needs his choice of sexual partner validated, Ralph is uncomfortable with his wife's vibrant sexuality, and his revulsion of 'the squalor and open lust' in Guadalajara betrays his own somewhat puritanical attitude to sex. Just as Earl does, Ralph watches his wife. His vision of Marian against the balustrade, 'her breasts pushing against the white cloth' of her blouse, puts Ralph in mind of 'an intensely dramatic moment' from a film 'into which Marian could be fitted but he could not'. Ralph's suspicion of Marian's infidelity 'with a man named Mitchell Anderson', triggered by this vivid memory, is 'never talked about' but, like Earl, Ralph becomes consumed by the need 'to know'. Neither of these characters can communicate their needs effectively, but both need external guarantees of their sexual adequacy. Weighed down by uncertainty about their most intimate relationships, these characters exemplify the anguish which arises from Carver's bleak social landscapes, where relationships are fragile and where the acquisition of meaningless material possessions, such as those of Bill Miller's more interesting neighbours ('Neighbors'), fills the emptiness in people's lives.

Links (in a compare/contrast fashion) passages 1 and 3.

Continues discussion of existential anguish by showing how it derives in part from a lack of meaning in men's lives – especially in marriages.

## Paragraph 4

Paragraph 4: maintaining a focus on the idea of uncertainty, and mindful of the need for *coherence* (criteria 2 and 6), the response refocuses on passage 1, picking up the key idea of 'watching' which links the three passages and appears in many other set stories (criterion 4). Elements of Carver's minimalist style are discussed, drawing appropriately on details from the passage (criterion 5). The continuing development of ideas about uncertainty (and a useful comparison with another story and passage 2) increases *plausibility* and leads to a 'larger' *views and values* comment, showing careful *analysis and close reading to support a coherent and detailed interpretation* (criterion 6).

With no clear guidelines in an uncertain and often menacing world, Carver's characters watch or imitate others in an effort to establish their own moral parameters and social boundaries. As an unsettled young man, Ralph is so impressed by a 'particularly persuasive teacher' that he, too, becomes a teacher. Earl closely observes the reactions of the other customers as Doreen works: 'What do you think of that?' he asks a stranger. Characteristically, Carver refrains from authorial explanation, instead subtly revealing Earl's inadequacy through the insistent, almost desperate tone of his dialogue: 'Well, what you think? ... Does it look good or not? Tell me'. Equally insecure and voyeuristic is Bill Miller ('Neighbors'). He dresses in the clothes of his more exciting neighbours and, while in their empty apartment, pries into the intimate details of their lives, finding that his sexual desire is stimulated through his vicarious connection with a more adventurous and confident couple. The insistent demands of the narrator in 'Nobody Said Anything', who recognises that his voice is 'crazy' yet is unable to 'stop', also reveals the deep insecurity of ordinary individuals, whose lack of confidence in themselves and in the world around them traps them in disappointed, and often confusing, lives.

Draws a connection between characters from different stories.

This views and values comment draws together the textual evidence considered in this paragraph.

### Paragraph 5

Paragraph 5 begins with a link back to the previous paragraph (through 'disappointed'). A strong focus on Carver's style and structure shows a clear understanding of the way the language works in these stories. The discussion is very confident here, showing an awareness of the effects of tone and sentence structure, and a strong sensitivity to the nuances of language (clearly addressing criterion 5). Again, the paragraph concludes with a thoughtful *views and values* comment, and a link (maintaining *coherence*) to the main idea (uncertainty) mentioned in the introduction.

Carver's sparse prose and the inclusion of seemingly unimportant details effectively capture the tensions arising from disappointed expectations. The slow pace of the narrative in 'They're Not Your Husband' is infused with an air of tense expectancy: 'The man next to Earl was reading a newspaper. He looked up and watched Doreen pour Earl a cup of coffee. He glanced at Doreen as she walked away'. Close attention to detail increases the tension as Earl watches in vain for a sign of interest from the man; Earl's persistent questioning and the other man's determined refusal to become involved create an inexplicable sense of menace. Similarly, in 'Nobody Said Anything', simple dialogue, insistent tone and a rapid sequence of short sentences heighten the domestic

Close focus on language use and effects.

tension as the narrator pleads: 'Just look. Look here. Look at this. Look what I caught'. The abrupt conclusion to both stories leaves tensions unresolved, reflecting the existential uncertainties which pervade the lives of Carver's characters, and also the lives of his readers.

## Paragraph 6: conclusion

In the conclusion, the idea of unresolved tensions (which arise from uncertainty) provides a link with the previous paragraph. The discussion draws to a close with an observation, based on one of the set passages and another story, suggesting that relief is available through moments of intimacy or even temporary escape. This might be construed as Carver's conclusion about the existential anguish of his inadequate and disconnected characters – a *views and values* observation. A brief reference to the 'summer steelhead' – the image in the introduction which provided the 'springboard' for the discussion – is an effective way of concluding the discussion.

Despite the unresolved tensions in his characters' lives, Carver's stories are sometimes lightened by brief moments of closeness. Ralph and Marian's painful confrontation leads to a moment of intimacy as the story concludes, although it is unclear whether this closeness will be sustained. The couple in 'How About This', although unsettled by the lack of certainty, recognise the need to 'love each other'. Carver's apparently simple stories poignantly reveal the anguish of the human condition but reveal that the ability to communicate and love can, like the 'summer steelhead', with its tenuous connection to a more secure world, sometimes offer a glimmer of reassurance and comfort.  
(968 words)

The phrase 'poignantly reveal' indicates that the writer is addressing the views and values suggested by the text.

As in the previous paragraphs, the writer connects and broadens the points made about specific textual details in order to make a strong interpretive remark about the text as a whole.

## General assessor comments

Overall, the discussion shows a good knowledge and understanding of the two selected stories, and draws appropriately from the passages, the stories and the wider text to support a *relevant and plausible interpretation* (criterion 1). The language used throughout the response is highly *expressive* (criterion 2), and the response would score in the A+ range.