Minimalism and the Aesthetic of Shame

by

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A thesis presented for the B. A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Winter 2015

For Dick Tobin, Kevin Brown and Kelly Williams

Acknowledgments

I would like to first thank my advisor, Professor Kerry Larson. At the start of this process, his incredible wealth of knowledge was able to hone my broad interests into a subject worth pursuing and arguing for. Throughout the year, the high standard he held me to, as well as his patience and insight, shaped that argument into something that made, I believe, a real contribution to our understanding of the literature. By the end of this process, however, I found myself most thankful to him for being a strong exemplar of the kind of thinker I hope to be one day. Thanks to Professor Gillian White for encouraging me to apply to honors, as well as for being the stern, urgent voice throughout the year when I needed it most. Thanks to Professor Sean Silver for reading countless drafts early on, spit-balling raw ideas and most importantly, for revealing to me the process of converting those raw ideas into higher academic thought. Thanks to the cohort for the edits and suggestions. I enjoyed struggling with you, growing with you and succeeding with you. Thanks to my parents for instilling in me the ambition to take on a project like this, and the intellectual curiosity to enjoy it. I must also thank them for taking an interest in my interests. Lastly, thanks to the University of Michigan and its wonderful English department for offering me this opportunity.

Abstract

Minimalism rose to prominence in the 1970s and ’80s, forever changing the landscape of American fiction. Writers like Raymond Carver, Gordon Lish, Amy Hempel and Ann Beattie were writing very short stories whose conflict and emotion hovered just below the surface of the text. Today, their focus on craft and efficient, compact sentences still resonate in the contemporary fiction being produced out of creative writing workshops across the country.

Critics widely approach understanding this Minimalist literature by what it is not — claiming it can be defined by its reduced and simple writing style, truncated narrative and the foregoing of compelling subject matter for depictions of the unremarkable, middle-class individual. However, I argue in this thesis that Minimalism should not be understood as a literature that is “minimal” in any way. Using Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era* as a foundation, I argue that this literature is best understood as one that is predicated on an aesthetic of shame. Minimalists like Raymond Carver were writing about their own lived experiences occupying a social class that was largely alienated and disregarded. Minimalism, then, can be understood as a story whose author places extreme control over how it is told so as to avoid exposing their personal experiences to a culture that alienates them. This understanding explains critics’ more common definition while also accounting for the more expressive and verbose passages that prove an exception to it.

After establishing this, I argue that the Minimalist author’s extreme control over the text inherently positions the reader as a voyeur, or intruder, which allows us to gain insight about the author’s relationship to the culture that is inducing the shame they are trying to avoid. Finally, I put this methodology to the test by applying it to short stories by Donald Barthelme and *The Executioner’s Song* by Norman Mailer, which seem at first to be exceptions. However, they ultimately demonstrate that understanding Minimalism as an author’s hyper-control over a story in response to shame is not only a sound methodology for rationalizing all of the creative choices made in these texts, but that it is applicable to Minimalist literature appearing out of other cultural contexts and time periods as well.

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Short Titles

"Talents": Aldridge, John W. *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction*. New York: Macmillan, 1992. Print.

"What We Talk About": Carver, Raymond. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. London: Vintage Classic, 2009. Print.

"Will You Please": Carver, Raymond. *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* London: Vintage Classic, 2009. Print.

"Raymond Carver": Meyer, Adam. *Raymond Carver (Twain's United States Authors Series)*. New York: Twayne, 1995. Print.

Introduction

Gordon Lish wrote a story in 1984 called “Fear: Four Examples.” As might be guessed, it is organized into four sections. First, a father waits for his daughter to arrive home from college, but she’s late. Second, the daughter arrives and they have dinner, but the father must take her to the hospital because her stomach hurts. Third, they return from the hospital and see a man trying to rob cars on the street outside their house. Fourth, the daughter goes to sleep and the father reflects on the day’s events. The story only spans three pages, so there’s no time to flesh out details that might otherwise be included. For example, it begins: “My daughter called from college. She is a good student, excellent grades, is gifted in a number of ways” (Lish 147). But Lish fails to then provide a name for that father, the daughter or the school she attends, let alone its location, or the areas of study in which she is most gifted. Lish disregards this kind of context, instead focusing all of his attention on moments that possess — though the word only appears in the title — a theme of fear. And not even different types of fear — the same one, rooted in the father’s love for his daughter, brought out in him by varying circumstances, but never dwelled upon:

> She said, “My belly. It’s agony. Get me a doctor.”
>
> There is a large and famous hospital mere blocks from my apartment. Celebrities go there, statesmen, people who must know what they are doing.
>
> With the help of a doorman and an elevator man, I got my child to the hospital.
>
> Within minutes, two physicians and a corps of nurses took the matter in hand.
>
> I stood by watching.
>
> It was hours before they had her undoubled and were willing to announce their findings.
>
> A bellyache, a rogue cramp, a certain stubborn but unspecifiable seizure of the

intestine — vagrant, unassuming, but not worth the bother of further concern. (Lish 147)

The father's fear originates from the physical welfare of his daughter. But the rush to the hospital, the operation itself, the father's standing by during that operation in what the reader can only imagine should be great worry, all seem to be reported as fact rather than described in a way that implies their importance or emotion, which the reader must infer. Adding to this experience is the style of Lish's writing, which favors the removal of adjectives, adverbs and complex sentence structure when they do not aid in relaying the key events of the plot. And then, quite suddenly, the passage ends without conclusive explanation, making it unclear why the scene was included in the story at all. Each of the four sections begin and end with this quality of abruptness, similar to how the story concludes as a whole — leaving whatever it was that Gordon Lish was trying to resolve, unresolved.

"Fear: Four Examples" is a typical work of literary Minimalism, which reached the height of its popularity in the United States in the 1970s and '80s.[1] The story bears many similarities to the works of Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel and Ann Beattie — even at times Donald Barthelme, Joan Didion and Norman Mailer[2] — in which critics have identified the same three qualities for defining Minimalism: (1) a reduced or simplified narrative structure, (2) a reduced or simplified

[1] Minimalism in American literature can arguably be traced to Hemingway, but for the purposes of this essay, I focus solely on the abundance of literature that appears in these two decades (see Just, especially 305 and 315). Much of today's literature is considered Minimalist as well. This is due in part to the massive impact Raymond Carver's writing had on the creative writing workshop, but rather than including those contemporary texts, I only focus on the foundational ones that gave rise to them (See McGurl, especially 281-288).

[2] Some other Minimalist authors I do not analyze but which are worth considering further are Bobbie Ann Mason, Jayne Ann Phillips, Frederick Barthelme, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolfe, Mary Robison and Samuel Beckett. Categorizing an author's work as Minimalist or not Minimalist is difficult and always up for debate, but during my reading, select works by these authors appeared to be the most strikingly Minimalist, and could be considered for further study.

style of prose and (3) and subject matter that focuses on the private, often autobiographical, life of the "common" lower- and middle-class individual.[3] But critics have not considered what drives these writers to partake in such an extreme removal of established norms of storytelling, and why they choose to tell stories about such unremarkable experiences. What's more, they have not taken into account how we should explain moments in these texts that don't fit into one of those three characteristics. The absence of character names and details about location or emotion in Lish's story, as well as instances when such things do arise, must be rooted in a conscious creative choice that has a specific intended effect on the reader. There is a deeper logic to his, and all, Minimalist fiction.

Throughout my thesis, I argue that this logic is predicated on an aesthetic of shame. Shame might bring to mind a flurry of emotions — humiliation, self-consciousness, embarrassment, a sense of dishonor — but Mark McGurl's definition reveals what underlies them all, and how they work to shape Minimalist literature. He identifies shame as, "an emotion associated with involuntary subjection to social forces, and marks the inherent priority and superiority of those forces to any given individual" (McGurl 285).[4] Shame, then, is an emotional response to losing

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[3] In 1985, *The Mississippi Review* devoted an entire issue to explaining these characteristics of Minimalism. Its editor, Kim Herzinger, identifies "equanimity of surface, ordinary subjects … and slightness of story" as the literature's prevalent features, which every single one of the issue's contributors reinforce: see Bellamy, Biguenet, Carver, Federman, Martone and Stevenson (7). In addition, John Barth calls Minimalism "Dick-and-Jane prose" to describe its simple, terse writing style. He also suggests that Minimalists do not require complex sentences because writing about the ordinary individual means they do not have complex ideas to express (6).

[4] Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* is the most comprehensive examination of the shame permeating Minimalist literature. He reveals that shame is born out of the alienation of the individual that occupies the lower- and middle-class, which can explain its Minimalist aesthetic and choice of subject matter. I attempt to build off of his broad historical analysis of the literature by taking a closer look at the inner-workings of the language of the text, which reveals how shame can explain the creative choices that shape Minimalism. I make use of his term "shameful exposure" throughout this essay (286).

control over how you present yourself to the world, as well as the world's judgment of you when this occurs.[5] The experiences of the "ordinary" individual that Minimalist authors like Lish write about are based on experiences from their own lives, or ones closely associated with the culture they grew up in.[6] Writing about this subject matter allows an author to contemplate the value of their experience in a society that seems to take it for granted. But it also means those stories are fundamentally embedded with shame, because once a story is finished, an author relinquishes control over how their experience will be perceived — leaving it up to the society that devalued it in the first place. The creative choices that shape Minimalist stories, therefore, are rooted in the attempt to avoid the emotion of shame that arises when authors are unable to prevent the reader from making a judgment on an experience or a culture that is personally tied to the author's sense of identity.

The three characteristics we parsed out from Lish's story in order to identify the critical consensus about Minimalism only provide a partial understanding of the factors shaping the literature because they are not supported by the system of interpretation that shame affords us. In the first section of this thesis, I exhibit the prevalence of shame in Minimalism, and show how an author's response to it can explain all of their creative choices. Because shame is founded on the individual's loss of control over their sense of identity, I argue that Minimalism should in turn be

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[5] Tomkins provides further explanation of the sociological and psychological makeup of shame, calling it both, "an interruption and a further impediment to communication which is itself communicated. When one hangs one's head or drops one's eyelids or averts one's gaze, one has communicated one's shame and both the face and the self unwittingly become more visible, to the self and others" (Sedgewick et al. 137). McGurl points out that these physical behaviors transfer to written fiction in the form of creative choices: a reduced, careful or controlled style, for example (285).

[6] Minimalist authors view their texts as embodiments of themselves, their cultures and their experiences. Their stories seem to be saying, as N. Scott Momaday explains, "Behold I give you my vision in these terms, and in the process I give you myself" (27). McGurl argues a similar point with Momaday's quote, claiming that a Minimalist author's approach to writing a text is "autoethnographic" (McGurl 236).

understood by its attention to maintaining that control. Authors attempt to exercise an extreme control over the personal experiences that make up their stories in an effort to avoid the shame that comes with having such vulnerable experiences be unfairly judged. Reading works by Joan Didion, Amy Hempel, Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie exemplify different methods of control, such as withholding emotionally vulnerable information, simplifying language during a crucial scene, but also creating bursts of expressive descriptions that allow an author to imply emotion without having to address it. In the second section, I look at how the Minimalist approach to controlling shameful experiences affects the reader's relationship with the text. Reading additional works by Hempel and Carver, I argue that the presence of shame inherently positions the reader as a voyeur, or intruder to Minimalist fiction. I then use the reader's voyeuristic perspective to explore how shame in Minimalism is founded in a cultural context that alienates the "ordinary" individual.[7] In the third section, I demonstrate the wide-ranging applicability of this understanding of Minimalism by accounting for the short stories of Donald Barthelme and *The Executioner's Song* by Norman Mailer that at first seem like exceptions. They reveal how the emotion of shame can conform to a wide variety of cultural contexts even beyond the one focusing on the individual, which in turn demonstrates that my understanding of Minimalism translates into those contexts as well. In making these arguments, I hope to create a more methodological understanding of Minimalism that moves away from perceiving it as a "minimal" literature only, and to incite scholars to expand that methodology to account for Minimalist works in all of Postwar American literature.

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[7] The idea that Minimalist authors are writing about the "ordinary" or "common" individual might seem inherently problematic because it generalizes an entire class experience. However, Minimalist authors embrace the archetypal quality of their subject matter by writing about overarching, generalized class issues that allow them to explore a lifestyle they view as an inherent part of their identity, if only by association. Another way to think of this subject matter is with Hoberek's term — "domestic content" — which conceives of Minimalism as a literature of the home as well as the private, everyday life (4).

Section One: Shame and Control

In identifying Minimalism by its truncated narrative and pared down style, it appears that critics have come to understand Minimalist literature by what it is *not*. Adam Meyer, for example, while tracking these characteristics in Raymond Carver's oeuvre, comes to the conclusion that "the salient feature of Minimalism, then, is what is not there — it is a style that thrives on omission" ("Raymond Carver" Meyer 29). And yet there are passages throughout the work of Carver and other Minimalists that seem to thrive less on the absence of language, and more on the creation of it. Minimalist stories can actually be quite expressive and verbose in certain moments, suggesting that Meyer's approach to understanding Minimalism is only accounting for a portion of the literature's disposition. Viewing Minimalism as a fiction predicated on an aesthetic of shame allows us to construct a rationale for the absences that Meyer has identified, the expressive moments he has not accounted for, and everything in between. Although shame would seem to confirm Meyer's idea of omission or absence — Carver and other writers are omitting language that exposes a shameful experience to the reader — shame is also frequently the catalyst of a Minimalist story's most expressive language. This means that we cannot understand Minimalism as an author's attempt to omit experiences altogether. Instead, Minimalism should be understood as the extreme control over how those experiences are presented to the reader so as to avoid shame as much as possible. The omission that Meyer recognizes is only the most obvious manifestation of this control, but virtually all language, including the extremely expressive moments, can be explained by how an author has chosen to regulate an experience to downplay or avoid their shame. Viewing Minimalism in this way should, I hope, demonstrate the variety and complexity of the creative choices being made in these texts, and provide a more systematic understanding of why, how and when they take shape as they do.

Joan Didion's novel *Democracy* is useful in first establishing what shame looks like when it appears in fiction, and how shame shapes it into something recognizably Minimalist. Her novel is not entirely Minimalist, so the moments that are emphasize how authors are responding to shame by exercising an extreme control over their stories. *Democracy* is about various love affairs between fictionalized political figures, and at first it doesn't seem like shame is present at all because there is no connection to Didion's own lived experience. But then, in chapter two, she inserts herself directly, saying, "Call me the author. Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion" (Didion 16). By acknowledging her own presence as the author, Didion is able to ruminate about her ability to properly tell the story. One moment in chapter two, for example, almost reads like a private confession: "I began thinking about Inez Victor and Jack Lovett at a point in my life when I lacked certainty, lacked even that minimum level of ego which all writers recognize as essential to the writing of novels, lacked conviction, lacked patience with the past and interest in memory" (Didion 17). Didion associates the characters in her novel with her own vulnerabilities she was feeling at that time in her life. So while there is not a direct lived experience evoking Didion's shame, it still materializes when she calls her capability as a narrator into question and connects that capability to her personal worth. The crucial moments in the novel, therefore, become Minimalist when Didion is trying to control how she depicts them, because depicting them inadequately reflects poorly on the time in her life that gave rise to those crucial moments. Take for example, an always-important section of a novel — the opening.

> The light at dawn during those Pacific tests was something to see.
>
> Something to behold.
>
> Something that could almost make you think you saw God, he said.
>
> He said to her.

> Jack Lovett said to Inez Victor.
>
> Inez Victor who was born Inez Christian.
>
> He said: the sky was pink no painter could approximate, one of the detonation theorists used to try, a pretty fair Sunday painter, he never got it. (Didion 11)

This passage is strikingly Minimalist and yet it is not all that pared down. Certain sentences are terse and simplified — "He said to her" — but others are rather down-the-middle, such as the first line — "The light at dawn during those Pacific tests was something to see." When read aloud, the entire passage does not sound noticeably reduced or simplified to the ear. Yet it strikes a Minimalist tone because the language is extremely controlled. Didion rolls out information carefully and in small segments to ensure she does not make a misstep at the start of the story. The shame in Didion's novel is rooted in the possibility that her writing will not be good enough and therefore, that she will not be good enough, inciting an emphasis on controlling the story, which shapes it into something recognizably Minimalist.

But it's easy to see how critics would come to identify Minimalism as something "minimal" because the exercise of control over language seems to most often result in its reduction and simplification. Having grown up with a father who suffered from a mental illness, the shame associated with tackling this personal subject matter drives Amy Hempel to cloak her story, "Celia is Back" in a truncated ambiguity and terseness. Hempel controls how the father's mental instability is represented on the page by showing moments that imply his mental state, without explaining them or delving into the emotional reactions of characters that would shamefully expose Hempel's vulnerabilities. The story begins with the father helping his two children fill out forms for a Jell-O pudding sweepstakes, for which they must write an essay responding to the question, "I love Jell-O pudding because ——" (Hempel 14). Nothing seems out of the ordinary as they discuss

different angles for writing the essay, until the father's suggestions continue for too long and start to make less and less sense — "I like Jell-O pudding because it has a tough satin finish that resists chipping and peeling" (Hempel 15). It seems like a joke at first, but the son's reaction suggests otherwise: "He opened his eyes and saw his son leave the room. The sound that had made the father open his eyes was the pen that the boy had thrown to the floor" (Hempel 15). What Hempel leaves out of this moment is just as revealing as what she includes. The story breaks to a new scene right after, so the son's emotions are not explained. The reader can only speculate about what his reaction means, because Hempel's terse and unemotional sentences don't provide insight about it. Hempel even fragments the emotion of the son's reaction by structuring the sentence in passive voice, and inverting the order in which it is described — the father opens his eyes before the reader is told what caused him to open them — which downplays the importance of that vulnerable moment. The information that Hempel leaves out and the terse way she presents everything that remains allows her to write about mental illness without shamefully exposing too much about the pain actually associated with having a mentally ill father. In fact, it's so effective that the son's response to the father only seems indicative of mental illness in retrospect of the ending, when the peculiarity of the father's behavior increases.[8] The father drives with his children to an unspecified appointment, and while stopped at an intersection, sees a sign in a random window that says, "Celia, formerly of Mr. Edward, has rejoined the staff" (Hempel 16). The father's reaction is strange, but Hempel keeps it under control.

> The traffic light turned green. Is she really back? he wondered. Is Celia back to stay?

[8] But if there was still any doubt, Hempel confirms that this is in fact the plot during an interview with *The Paris Review*, during which she says that the story is about a man who "comes unglued in front of his two children" (Winner).

> Through the horns going off behind him, through the fists of his daughter beside him, the father stayed stopped.
>
> Everything will be fine, he thought, now that Celia's here. (Hempel 16)

The father does not know who Celia is. Hempel does not even say who the father *thinks* Celia might be. She provides a careful, controlled amount of information — the randomness of the moment, the honking horns, the daughter's fists — to shed light on the reality of the father's mental state and the effect it has on his family without revealing anything that would leave her open to judgment.

The reduction of important language and information in Hempel's story is certainly the most common method of control in Minimalist fiction. But as the opening to Didion's novel suggests, reduction is not the only method of control. Raymond Carver's "Why Don't You Dance?" shows how such texts actually make use of expressive and verbose language to control a shameful experience. In this story, Carver withholds most information and emotion with a truncated plot and simplified language to avoid acknowledging a shameful topic as long as he can. But eventually, that shameful topic comes out in three expressive moments that compress its presentation to the reader. The story is about a middle-aged man who puts his old bedroom furniture out on the lawn to sell. A young couple comes by, and wishes to purchase most of it for their new apartment. The man offers them some whiskey and soon they are all drunk. The man puts on a record and suggests that the couple dance, which they do. Later, the girl tells her friends about the strange experience, but cannot make sense of it. First, it's important to establish how Carver writes the majority of this six-page story:

> In the kitchen, he poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard. The mattress was stripped and the candy-striped sheets lay beside two pillows on the

> chiffonier. Except for that, things looked much the way they had in the bedroom — nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, nightstand and reading lamp on her side.
>
> His side, her side.
>
> He considered this as he sipped the whiskey. ("What We Talk About" Carver 3)

Carver's language is efficient, direct, even terse and unemotional. This passage also reveals that the man has, in some capacity, lost his wife, which is why the furniture is out on the lawn. The man contemplates this fact, but Carver does not tell the reader the details of that contemplation. If the man is hurting, the reader can only infer it from the bare facts of the situation. With the seeming end of his relationship, however, comes the blossoming of a new one, as the young couple shops through his furniture. Yet the way they act around each other is withholding, unromantic and distant, mostly on behalf of the boy, who brushes off her affection. The shame of the story, then, seems to be rooted in a sentiment the middle-aged man and the girl share — the desire for true companionship — which Carver wants to explore without exposing his own feelings to judgment. None of this would be clear, however, if Carver did not open up his language somewhat: "Why don't you kids dance? he decided to say, and then he said it. 'Why don't you dance?'" ("What We Talk About" Carver 8). The language in this moment accesses the man's interiority while also faltering to do so efficiently. Of course if the man decided to say it he would have said it — repeating that action is unnecessary when measured against the terms of Carver's language used everywhere else. But the repetition also puts weight on the moment without having to admit to this weight, implying that the man desires to see them dance among his furniture as he and his wife used to do. And the young couple complies with his request:

> Arms about each other, their bodies pressed together, the boy and the girl moved up and

> down the driveway. They were dancing. And when the record was over, they did it again, and when that one ended, the boy said, "I'm drunk." ("What We Talk About" Carver 9)

Once again, Carver's language stutters at a crucial moment. The description of the young couple dancing is enough to communicate that this is in fact what they are doing, but Carver reiterates: "They were dancing." This is the climax of the story. Not only is the man able to witness something nostalgic about his own life, but the girl also gets to be close with the boy among the furniture they will soon own in their new apartment — giving her hope for the future. Their dancing is strange, but it is a fast enough moment that it could be easily overlooked had Carver not broken from the pace of his storytelling and added weight to their actions. No emotion is expressed here, but the turmoil associated with the different versions of the story's conflict — the desire for authentic companionship — are communicated, and without Carver having to divulge them in a way he doesn't feel comfortable with. After this moment, he opens up his language one last time, which confirms the significance of the dance through a subtle implication. Once the first song is over, the middle-aged man asks the girl for a dance:

> He felt her breath on his neck.
>
> "I hope you like your bed," he said.
>
> The girl closed and then opened her eyes. She pushed her face into the man's shoulder. She pulled the man closer.
>
> "You must be desperate or something." ("What We Talk About" Carver 9).

They are both referring to the sale of the furniture, but the weight Carver has given the act of dancing among this furniture has turned it into a symbol of the companionship they so sorely desire. This final piece of dialogue — "You must be desperate or something" — is not redundant

or taking on a momentary verboseness. But it is the only piece of dialogue that expresses an emotion outright — desperation. The association made when she says this during their dance is that they are each desperate in their own distinct, yet similar way. Dancing has taken on a higher importance, and allows Carver to insinuate the stakes of these people's problems while also avoiding the shameful exposure involved in writing a story that openly confronts those problems.

Carver's story suggests that Minimalist authors are not always controlling an experience to avoid shame altogether, because the shameful nature of the experience is what they are exploring. Though that may be the case at times, the goal seems equally rooted in ensuring that the judgment the reader inflicts on an experience that would result in shame does not get out of hand. Expressive moments are indicative of this careful balance between exploring a shameful experience and losing control over how that experience will be judged. For example, another Carver short story called "Viewfinder" becomes increasingly expressive and open as the story progresses in tandem with the narrator's acceptance that his family has abandoned him. The story begins when a man who has hooks for hands takes a photo of the narrator's house and tries to sell it to him. The man with hooks invites himself inside the narrator's house, and the two of them get to talking. At first, there is no indication that the narrator is living alone, because Carver only makes subtle hints about it. For example, when the narrator looks at the photograph, he says, "So why would I want a photograph of this tragedy?" ("What We Talk About" Carver 12). It's a rhetorical question, but even so, Carver doesn't try to answer it in exposition. He almost always neglects to follow up with expected details, keeping his language terse and reduced. Over the course of the story, however, the "tragedy" the narrator was referring to becomes clearer.

> He said, "You're alone, right?"
>
> He looked at the living room. He shook his head.

"Hard, hard," he said. ("What We Talk About" Carver 13)

Carver brings the issue to the reader's attention, but doesn't dwell on it, with the narrator's response being just a quick, unemotional "Drink you coffee" ("What We Talk About" Carver 13). Though the story moves on to other subjects, the question of what it means to be alone and why it might be hard is now present in the reader's mind, especially when the subject resurfaces for a third time. The man with hook hands says, "'Me, I keep a room downtown. It's okay. I take a bus out, and after I've worked the neighborhoods, I go to another downtown. You see what I'm saying? Hey, I had kids once. Just like you,' he said" ("What We Talk About" Carver 13). The shame of abandonment incites Carver to control how the reader learns about information regarding this topic. Carver works through it, moving from a general reference about tragedy to revealing that this tragedy has to do with being alone and then to revealing that he no longer lives with his kids. Eventually, this allows the narrator to admit his situation outright, and in colorful terms. Near the end of the story, the narrator says, "the whole kit and caboodle. They cleared right out'" ("What We Talk About" Carver 14). Carver carefully presents the reality of the situation over time so that when his narrator finally says this expressive term, such an open confession has a much softer blow. What began as a withheld shame in this story is now something that the narrator can openly discuss with a tinge of vibrancy that Carver did not necessarily want to avoid, but rather contextualize properly so the reader would not misjudge it.

These Carver stories may seem like extreme examples, because they only appear to break from the reduced, simplified aesthetic critics associate with Minimalism in brief passages. But in other stories, this expressiveness is much more widespread. Shame, after all, is an emotion that can arise with different intensities in response to the situation that is causing it. In, "Learning to Fall," Ann Beattie demonstrates how authors can exercise a looser control over their stories that results in

different variations of the Minimalist aesthetic, which in Beattie's story, is much wordier and expressive. At the same time, her story serves as another example of how moments that are especially vulnerable to shameful exposure can cause an author to tighten control over a story by making it even more expressive. "Learning to Fall" is about a woman who spends the afternoon running errands in New York with her friend Ruth's ten-year-old son Andrew, who she has become close to over the years. At the end of the story, she and Andrew get coffee with her on-again-off-again lover Ray while they wait for the train. The story is shaped by a shame rooted in the narrator's unhappiness about leading a life whose trajectory she is unable to control. But this is not a realization that the narrator comes to until the very last line of the story — "what will happen can't be stopped. Aim for grace" (Beattie 15). In fact, everything that leads up to that line feels as if the narrator is wandering through a plot that has no underlying logic or motivation. Of course, this sense of mindless wandering is indicative of the way in which the narrator wanders through her own life, but it also means that the shame produced out of those moments of wandering have less of an influence on the text because the narrator is less aware and self-conscious of it. Beattie's control on the story relaxes in accordance to moments where shame poses a lesser threat. In this case, those moments occur when the narrator moves listlessly through her day: "Andrew and I are walking downhill in the Guggenheim Museum, and I am thinking about Ray. Neither of us is looking at the paintings. What Andrew likes about the museum is the view, looking down into the pool of blue water speckled with money" (Beattie 5). The language Beattie uses here shows her tendency to make use of pretty descriptions — "blue water speckled with money" — and her comfort in revealing inner-monologues — "I am thinking about Ray" — when a moment does not reflect why she is unhappy with her life. But the simple, short sentences also reveal that Beattie is still maintaining some control over the scene — just one that is not as strict. Andrew and Ray seem

to represent facets of the shame the narrator has about her inability to take control of her life, so her language adapts when their actions are indicative of that shame. Ray reminds her how she cannot hold down a lasting relationship like her friend Ruth, and Andrew reminds her that she has no kids of her own, as well as that she is not hanging around the people she would have predicted, because Andrew is disabled. As they walk down the Guggenheim steps in this passage, the most truncated and withholding fragment is the narrator's mention of Ray. She says she is thinking about him, but does not reveal further detail because discussing the instability of their relationship is too vulnerable. Meanwhile, nothing in this passage about Andrew's actions reflect negatively on the narrator, so the language appears to be looser, though still consciously regulated. Later, when Andrew's disability is more apparent, the language increases its control because his condition reflects on the narrator's life as well. This example of control, however, is not executed through retracted language or information, but in noticeable expressiveness.

> "Don't throw coins from up here, Andrew," I say. "You might hurt somebody."
>
> "Just a penny," he says. He holds it up to show me. A penny: no tricks.
>
> "You're not allowed. It could hit somebody in the face. You could hurt somebody, throwing it."
>
> I am asking him to be careful of hurting people. When he would not be born, an impatient doctor used forceps and tugged him out, and there was slight brain damage. (Beattie 5)

For most of this passage, Beattie maintains the control that she demonstrated before. It is one that has a terse edge to it, but is also honest and somewhat stylized. As it progresses, however, the language in this passage takes on an expressiveness that sticks out from the rest of the story. She repeats something that the reader has already inferred themselves — that the narrator is asking

Andrew to be careful of hurting people. By repeating this information, it's almost as if the narrator is taking a deep breathe before revealing why she would have to explain something so simple to Andrew. The expressiveness of the narrator's description of Andrew's brain damage allows the narrator to acknowledge the topic without having to reveal that it reminds her that she is living a life with people and obligations she did not ask for. She neglects discussing Andrew's condition until she can no longer avoid it, and then presents the information on her terms, so that the reader's perception of him — and thus her — will not be misconstrued. The expressiveness of this moment also funnels the shame she feels about herself into an external outlet. The redundancy and honesty of the passage, then, is a method of control that aims to transfer the possibility of shame away from her own personal identity.

If we revisit Meyer's understanding of Minimalism with the insight the work of Beattie and other Minimalist authors provide, we see that he is not entirely off the mark. He claims that Minimalism is defined by "what is not there — it is a style that thrives on omission" ("Raymond Carver" Meyer 29). The works of Didion, Hempel, Carver and Beattie are all actively omitting emotions and information from their stories. But Meyer doesn't account for the moments of inclusion, and expressiveness we see in them as well, which suggest that omission is just one means to an end he hasn't identified. We know now that Minimalism is shaped by the control that authors exercise over their stories because they want to downplay or avoid the shame associated with exploring some of the more personal and vulnerable issues that appear in them. With this methodology, we can understand the creative choices made in Minimalist stories of all varieties — from the terse, withdrawn ambiguity of Hempel's short story to the more open, wandering style of Beattie and the interplay of both of these extremes that occurs in the fiction of Carver. They develop for us an understanding that shows how authors systematically arrive at an aesthetic we

recognize as Minimalist, but through various means and strategies all grappling with the same phenomenon — shame.

Section Two: The Reader as Voyeur

Although the control of shame fosters variety among Minimalist stories, they all seem to be connected by a subject matter that focuses on the everyday life of the average person — whether it be a nameless couple at a yard sale or a woman running errands in New York. Minimalist literature's propensity for writing about the private moments of ordinary life does not sit well with many critics, who deem the subject matter insignificant.[9] For John Aldridge, the exploration of "the personal life" in Minimalist fiction fails to have any "meaningful relevance to a general human condition or dilemma" because authors write about it in "isolation from the larger social issues of their time"[10] that would give it this relevance ("Talents" Aldridge 40). Minimalist stories have nothing to say that's worth listening to, which means that the dramatic tensions authors try to develop in them have no payoff.

> What one repeatedly finds instead is that such tensions as have been generated either fail to find release or are dissipated in a fog of ambiguity, which, more often than not, is an affection of profundity to cover a failure of conception. One is left, in short, with an apparently fictionalized fragment of experience that is, in fact, not fictionalized because it has no thematic significance. ("Talents" Aldridge 42)

Aldridge does not interpret Minimalism through a dialectic of shame, but through the different ways an author attempts to conceal the fact that they are writing about something insignificant. Yet

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[9] See Federman for perhaps the harshest of this kind of criticism. He says, "I really don't have time to write about the Minimalists, and to tell you the truth I don't find their stuff very exciting" because their subject matter is ordinary and " unconcerned with form" (Federman 46).

[10] For historical context of isolation and middle-class economics, see McGurl 296-297. See Meyer for a more in-depth discussion of isolation in Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 32-69, but especially 68.

this claim on insignificance is the exact kind of scrutiny and alienation that reveals the shame Minimalist authors are trying to avoid in writing about their lived experiences,[11] which causes them to depict those experiences in what Aldridge perceives to be a "fog of ambiguity." In his complaint, he seems to be equally frustrated with this "fog," noting how Minimalist stories prevent him from penetrating their inner motivations that he uses for determining their value.[12] Shame, then, creates an interesting relationship between the text and Aldridge — excluding him from the discussion of a topic he doesn't care for in the first place.

In this section, I explore how shame affects the reader-text relationship in Minimalist literature, and how this relationship is indicative of Minimalism's self-awareness about its greater cultural value. I have already established that authors attempt to avoid the shame associated with writing about their private, yet ordinary experiences by exercising an extreme level of control over how those experiences are presented to the reader. I argue that the aesthetic this process creates inherently forces the reader into the position of an intruder, or voyeur to the text.[13] It is this reading experience that has critics like Aldridge so frustrated, because it prevents them from conclusively determining the significance of a story. The reader's role as a voyeur seems to come in response to

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[11]The cultural expectations that alienate the experience of the individual can also be found in the less-aggressive writings of Wallace Stegner, who had a wide-ranging influence as the forefather of the creative writing workshop in the United States: "Any good serious fiction is collected out of reality, and its parts ought to be vivid and true to fact and to observation. The parts are reassembled in such a way that the architecture, the shape of the action, is meaningful" (6). The emphasis on the narrative structure to create something meaningful — and to write about something meaningful — are the same qualities that Aldridge deems absent from Minimalist literature. For further examples of the cultural expectations embodied by Aldridge, see Atlas and Just.

[12] Linsey Abrams expresses a similar frustration phrased another way: "We don't rise above the narrative, like a spaceship circling the planet, to see from another perspective a different whole. Nor do we penetrate below the apparent world into the deep interior lives of characters, where another kind of community may be found. This fiction and human landscape is flat" (27).

[13] See Saltzman, especially 111, for more on how the reader is positioned as a voyeur in Minimalist literature.

the standards[14] Aldridge and other critics use to evaluate significance, which alienate and devalue the experience of the ordinary individual. By writing a story as if it is for someone other than the reader, Minimalist authors can explore the individual experience free from the standards that alienated them in the first place. Amy Hempel's, "When It's Human Instead of When It's a Dog" first allows us to make sense of the reader's unique voyeuristic perspective. Then Raymond Carver's short story, "Fat," demonstrates how this frees authors to reconcile their experiences while eluding cultural pressure from critics like Aldridge.[15]

Amy Hempel's short story "When it's Human Instead of When it's a Dog" is about a cleaning woman named Mrs. Hatano, who returns to the house of her client — only referred to as "Mr." — after a work hiatus that began when his wife passed away. The shame of the story is rooted in the vulnerability felt in confronting the reality and fleeting nature of death. Hempel's control over the story produces a terse, simplified and withholding aesthetic to reintroduce Mrs. Hatano into her familiar workplace, which has taken on a different atmosphere in her absence.

> It is just inside the front door. It is the first thing she sees when she stops to wipe her feet.
>
> It has been raining for a week, and it won't be stopping soon. It's what the people were talking about on the bus ride in, and Mrs. Hatano guesses that's what they'll be talking about on the bus ride going home. (Hempel 75)

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[14] Lasch contributes to these cultural standards as well, tracking in Minimalist literature what he sees as a deficient reading experience: "the inner journey leads no where, neither to a fuller understanding of history as refracted through a single life or even to a fuller understanding of the self. The more you dig the less you find" (155).

[15] Minimalist authors not only position the reader as a voyeur, but are also fascinated with voyeurism as a theme appearing within the stories themselves (Boxer and Phillips 75). Both Carver and Hempel stories included in this section are, therefore, consciously exploring what it means to intrude on a private experience on multiple levels.

In this opening moment, Hempel's language has little variety — each sentence is a similar length and begins with "it is/is has" — which gives the passage a monotonous or unexciting tone. The "it" Hempel refers to here is the stain caused by the death of the man's wife. But the opening is truncated, and diverts to the topic of weather before clarifying this to the reader. Hempel's language, as well as this choppiness, should be understood as an act of control over the presentation of emotions related to death. But this control is also what seems to make the reader a voyeur. Glancing through Hempel's language again, it becomes clear that control positions the reader this way organically — as a byproduct of an author's attempt to avoid shame. By starting the two opening sentences with the pronoun "it," Hempel fails to give the reader the antecedent, which means they are only getting a fraction of the information actually occurring. The truncated shift from "it" to the topic of weather shows how a reader can miss what seems like necessary information, as the text moves from idea to idea while seemingly unaware that the reader is present. Also, the monotony of the opening's style prevents the reader from gauging any emotions Mrs. Hatano might be going through, making the reader feel as if they are observing her from a distance. In the process of regulating the presentation of death to avoid the shame of exposing the vulnerable emotions associated with it, Hempel pushes the reader out, turning them into a voyeur by consequence.

It makes sense that the reader would come to feel as if they are experiencing the story in this way. Minimalism is predicated on a self-awareness of how it is going to be perceived. A story that is constantly guarding its own vulnerability would implicitly make the reader feel like an intruder, as if they are watching an experience that does not belong to them. And yet, voyeurism does not seem to be an entirely accidental phenomenon, either. In many ways, the creative choices that Hempel makes in this passage could easily be understood as an intentional manipulation of the

reader's perspective that allows Hempel to regulate the presentation of her experiences just as the terse language and truncated narrative do for her story on their own. A later moment demonstrates how voyeurism can often seem intentional in this way, because Hempel opens up about Mrs. Hatano's interaction with death and yet also keeps the reader's access to the story limited: "The wastepaper basket is filled with cards. There is an open letter on the desk, and, although it is not in Mrs. Hatano's nature to pry, she begins to read. It is a sympathy note" (Hempel 76). This moment is more revealing about Mrs. Hatano's personality, and is much more open and expressive about acknowledging the presence of death in Mr.'s home. Yet the reader is still excluded from some basic information about it, which suggests that Hempel is consciously balancing what the reader has access to. It is not the style that keeps the topic from spilling out onto the page, so much as Hempel's treatment of the reader. Hempel has conditioned the reader to not expect information they might normally receive. She purposefully writes as if the story is for someone else — or no one else — which means she does not have to provide the potentially vulnerable contents of the letter even when Mrs. Hatano is reading it. Hempel's story, therefore, shows that there are two courses by which the reader comes to be positioned as a voyeur — as a byproduct of the control authors exercise over shameful experiences, and as an additional method for controlling those experiences.

Whether by accident or by design, voyeurism allows a story to operate separately from, and without concern for, the needs of the reader. Minimalist authors, therefore, appear to be writing, as Aldridge said in his complaint, "a fictionalized fragment of experience" that explores a more authentic version of the ordinary individual, and without having to fulfill the cultural expectations that he and other critics use to appraise value ("Talents" Aldridge 42). Positioning the reader as a voyeur is the process of a text freeing itself from the limitations of its culture, as well as shielding

itself from the shame of having that culture deem the experiences it explores as insignificant. Raymond Carver's short story, "Fat" shows how voyeurism affords the author this freedom and in turn, this protection.[16] It begins with a waitress telling her friend Rita about her work day, which mostly consisted of serving a fat man who will not stop ordering more food. Carver constructs the narrative out of an aesthetic of terse, efficient language that attempts to control the shameful exposure the narrator feels in living a monotonous life with an unpromising future. It's possible that this aesthetic fosters the reader's role as a voyeur, but there is no doubt that Carver is also intentionally positioning them as one. He begins the story, "I am sitting over coffee and cigarets at my friend Rita's and I am telling her about it" ("Will You Please" Carver 3). The narrator is aware of the reader's presence, but only as an observer to a conversation that is not intended for them. Throughout the story, the reader is frequently reminded that the story is being told to Rita, and not them: "How is old tub-of-guts doing? He's going to run your legs off, says Harriet. You know Harriet" ("Will You Please" Carver 6). Of course, the reader does not know Harriet, and never learns anything more about Harriet. The reader only knows that the narrator has had a long, hard day with this fat man, which does not seem to possess a clear, higher importance without the reader knowing more. But it's possible that this importance is alluded to in the ending, when the narrator's shame becomes slightly more obvious.

> I feel depressed. But I won't go into it with (Rita). I've already told her too much.
>
> She sits there waiting, her dainty fingers poking her hair.
>
> *Waiting for what?* I'd like to know.
>
> It is August.

[16] Carver uses V.S. Pritchett's definition of a short story — "something glimpsed from the corner of the eye" — to explain his approach to writing short stories ("On Writing" Carver 50). For Carver, it is a glimpse into these alienated experiences, which leaves the reader with a general impression rather than exact details.

My life is going to change. I feel it. (“Will You Please” Carver 8)

The narrator’s story about her day has ended, so the direct use of voyeurism manifests more in the way that the narrator seems to be expressing her thoughts for herself, and not the reader. For example, the reader does not know what the month of August has to do with Rita’s “waiting for something” because they are not privileged to this information. The last line — “My life is going to change. I feel it.” — insinuates that the shame shaping the story is rooted in the narrator’s unhappiness with her job and the lack of potential in her life. But it also does not provide a high significance that connects this struggle, as Aldridge says, to “the general human condition” (“Talents” Aldridge 42). Yet Aldridge cannot say this for sure, because there is still weight to this final line, a hint at a higher importance — just nothing concrete. The reader’s position as a voyeur lets Carver allude to a higher importance without having to do so definitively. Carver can explore authentically the narrator’s circumstances outside of Aldridge’s standards without subjecting himself to the ridicule of having failed to meet those standards.

The reader’s relationship to Minimalist fiction is unique and complex, and often frustrating for critics who want to evaluate it within the confines of very specific cultural standards. The reader’s position as voyeur is born out of the control authors exercise over shameful experiences, which affords them the freedom to write outside of the cultural context that fosters such standards. Doing so seems to be a mechanism for more authentically representing the experience of the common, lower- or middle-class individual that is so closely tied to the author. But it also acts as a shield against critics like Aldridge who would ridicule any definitive significance authors attach to their stories for not living up to his expectations. Aldridge is right, then, to call Minimalism a fictionalized fragment of experience. And we might consider that such a fragment, in its freedom from Aldridge, may actually be written as a challenge asserting how very wrong he is to devalue it.

Section Three: Shame Beyond the Individual

By now, I have established a methodology for reading Minimalism, constructed from the idea that shame can explain all of the creative choices made by a Minimalist author and how they affect the reader, and which even ties works of various styles, lengths and formats into one cohesive logic. However, the implication thus far has been that a story can *only* be shaped into something recognizably Minimalist if it is founded in a lower- or middle-class subject matter that derives its shame from the involuntary subjection of the alienated individual to social forces. This seems like a rather specific subject matter that ignores the possibility that Minimalism can take on a wide range of topics. In this section, I attempt to account for works that are commonly considered to be Minimalist, but which do not completely fit these specific criteria. I track how these stories arrive at a Minimalist aesthetic, and contemplate whether their differences debunk the shame methodology, simply require that we expand our understanding of shame, or if we should actually limit our understanding of Minimalism to a select group of authors. The first of these problematic texts is the short story, "Will You Tell Me?" by the postmodern writer Donald Barthelme, which like most of his work, makes use of direct, terse language, with bursts of expressiveness that distantly resembles the stories of Carver and Hempel. And yet Barthelme's "Will You Tell Me?" seems to lack the individual's concern with being subjected to social forces, because it is more concerned with commenting on the cultural landscape. The second text is Norman Mailer's novel, *The Executioner's Song*. A close reading of several passages from this massive work of New Journalism shows that Mailer's use of the reduced, simple style could never be predicated on Mailer's personal concern about being shamed, because the nature of the genre concentrates on the lives of reported subjects. However, the absence of individual shame in both of these texts suggests that their alternate focuses — the cultural landscape and reported subjects — have different

versions of shame embedded within them, and which their authors still respond to with extreme control over language. This refocused version of shame seems to reinforce the soundness of my methodology for understanding Minimalism, but also indicates that we must consider how it can translate into cultural contexts beyond those of the lower and middle class that Carver and others depict.

Donald Barthelme's writing career overlapped with that of Carver, Hempel and Beattie, but it also began nearly a decade before. The cultural context in which Barthelme was writing is not much different than these other Minimalist authors, and the aesthetic of his prose bears a resemblance to their works. Yet that aesthetic does not seem to be shaped by shame as it appears in those other works. The language in his short story, "Will You Tell Me?" is not rooted in the individual's involuntary subjection to judgment, but in being *ashamed* about the state of the culture the story depicts. The story is more concerned with society at large than it is with personal identity, and so its aesthetic can be explained by Barthelme's attempt to impose rationality onto the irrational and senseless world he write about.[17] The story — a series of love affairs and scandals between friends — is very convoluted and confusing. The opening paragraph, for example, is easy to get lost in.

> Hubert gave Charles and Irene a nice baby for Christmas. The baby was a boy and its name was Paul. Charles and Irene who had not had a baby for many years were delighted. They stood around the crib and looked at Paul; they could not get enough of him. He was a

[17]Although Barthelme arrives at his Minimalist aesthetic in response to a different kind of shame, he receives similar criticism as Carver and other Minimalists, suggesting that the effect on the reader, while not always entirely voyeuristic, still possesses an elusiveness. For example, Aldridge writes that Barthelme's fiction fails to "have any connection with, or any power to influence, the course of individual destiny or the drama of our hermetically personal consciousness" ("Devil in the Fire" 262).

> handsome child with dark hair, dark eyes. Where did you get him Hubert? Charles and Irene asked. From the bank, Hubert said. It was a puzzling answer, Charles and Irene puzzled over it. Everyone drank mulled wine. Paul regarded them from the crib. Hubert was pleased to have been able to please Charles and Irene. They drank more wine. (Barthelme 38)

Barthelme presents four characters in this opening paragraph, and very soon introduces Eric as well. He does not, however, do much to differentiate them, and bouncing back and forth from name to name makes things somewhat confusing. In addition, the story is not grounded in reality. Hubert gives a baby to Charles and Irene, but Barthelme doesn't really explain what that means. Then, later, Hubert says that he got the baby from a bank, which causes a moment's pause, but only a brief one before the story continues with its absurdity. Barthelme writes in short, simple and terse sentences that express little or no emotion — an aesthetic that resembles other Minimalist texts. But this aesthetic is not the product of Barthelme's control over a shame that affects his own emotional wellbeing, because there is not much of a presence of the individual in this story. The absurd content instead suggests that he feels ashamed about the state of the culture his characters represent. Rather than controlling an experience to avoid a personal shame, Barthelme controls it in order to make sense of the shame he feels *toward* a culture that, in this story, is a quagmire of nonsensically superficial relationships. Barthelme is responding to feeling ashamed about that culture, and chooses to exercise a control over the story so that he can process and perhaps attribute some kind of logic to it, which results in a Minimalist aesthetic. Barthelme's writing upholds the notion that an author's control of shame shapes Minimalist stories, but it also requires us to reconsider the scope of the term. His story shows that Minimalist authors can feel shame about a multiplicity of things that extend beyond the individual, and use control over a story to handle that

shame for goals other than the preservation of the individual's emotional wellbeing.

Norman Mailer's novel, *The Executioner's Song* seems to be another example of how an author can arrive at a Minimalist aesthetic by controlling shameful experiences that are rooted beyond the individual. Mailer's text is a unique case because it is an incredibly long piece of New Journalism — recounting the life of Gary Gilmore, who requested to be executed in 1977 after murdering two people — but it was published in the same year as many prominent Minimalist works[18] and possesses a controlled aesthetic that bears similarity to them. Take for example, a moment when Gary gets into a fight with his girlfriend, Nicole.

> They rested on the outside steps. She told him she couldn't live with him anymore. They sat. She had to get away. After a few minutes, she took the kids and got in the car. But now he wouldn't let her go. He put his hands through the open window and held her. She opened her purse, took out the gun and pointed it at him. (Mailer 208)

The language is simple, straightforward and ordered. And for a scene in which Nicole's tolerance for Gary has broken and she is threatening his life with a gun, it is also strikingly calm, controlled and muffled of its emotion. But it's unclear whether this control — a control of Nicole's emotion that she recounted to Mailer's partner Lawrence Schiller who recounted it to Mailer and then Mailer fictionalized — is rooted in Mailer's personal concern with being subjected to social forces, because the content of the scene is not about his lived experiences. We can locate the story's alternate source of shame in Andrew Wilson's observation that Mailer chooses to dispense of a "centered, authoritative narrative voice," especially in the first half of the book that focuses on

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[18] *The Executioner's Song* was published in 1979, as was Barthelme's short story collection *Great Days*. Carver was also in the process of drafting many of the stories for *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, some of which were first published in various literary magazines that year (Sklenicka 499).

Gary's history (Wilson 3). The lack of authority of Mailer's narrative voice suggests that his distance from the actual events forces him to command extra control over the language because he is weary of including something that might lead to distorting crucial moments — such as a fight between Gary and Nicole. While Mailer notes in the afterword that brief scenes had to be fabricated due to a gap in Schiller's more than fifteen thousand pages of transcribed interviews, Mailer's control over the language is less concerned with total accuracy and more with ensuring that his story does not invite unfair judgments on the characters. The aesthetic of the story, therefore, is shaped by Mailer's control over experiences that might bring shame on his real-life subjects, not himself. In fact, Mailer is so careful and unconfident in depicting some of the most crucial conversations, that he actually reduces the text to a script-like dialogue for entire scenes, such as this brief one.

> GILMORE You can tell Larry Schiller I want that phone call to Nicole. I'm sure that Schiller can put pressure on people if he wants to.
>
> STRANGER Larry's quite a mover, all right.
>
> GILMORE You guys have made some moves, but it hasn't been enough, I haven't gotten the phone call.
>
> STRANGER It hasn't been successful. (Mailer 738)

These conversations often appear without context. Because Mailer can only create that context by fabricating it, the act of paring down a scene to bare dialogue serves as a way to control the reader's impression of Gary so that it is fair and free of Mailer's unintended bias. As a result, the reader must piece together a greater context themselves, which gives the reading experience a voyeuristic quality. On the other hand, when Mailer is sure he will get the story right, he doesn't have to be as careful about shaming his subjects, so the language loses this reduced aesthetic and

shifts the reader out of their position as a voyeur.[19] For example, the scenes with his partner Lawrence Schiller are not written like the one describing Nicole pulling a gun on Gary.

> Larry waited in the car while Phil came out of the hospital with this nice little adolescent. Schiller opened the door for her, and she got in the back seat, and he slid in next. It was a good, bright, sunny day, not at all cold, and she was wearing a skirt and blouse and little jacket, and her hair was neatly tied back in a ponytail. Schiller immediately noticed that she gave no eye contact. After he introduced himself as Larry — he and Christensen having agreed she might have heard the name Schiller on television — she said, "I'm April," and he cracked a joke. (Mailer 776)

Schiller could more easily verify the accuracy of his own experiences while Mailer was writing, and he is not emotionally invested or vulnerable to Mailer's depictions since he is only shown as the journalist observing the events. Therefore, the language Mailer uses to describe him is less controlled, which results in a looser aesthetic. The language speeds up, uses a larger vocabulary and employs a variety of sentence structures that never appear in scenes with Gary because Mailer does not have to control the narrative as closely to ensure that he is not subjecting anyone to a judgment that could result in shame. This means that Mailer's novel is shaped by shame as much as Carver's work. It also means that Mailer's novel attempts to avoid shame by exercising a control over experiences just like the short stories of Amy Hempel. But it does not mean that shame hangs over Mailer's emotional wellbeing like it does in these other texts. Rather, shame threatens the real-life people Mailer is transferring to the page, and which he has an obligation to depict fairly. Carver, Hempel and Mailer arrive at stories with similar aesthetics, but are motivated to avoid

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[19] See Hicks for a further examination of the dichotomy of simple and complex language in *The Executioner's Song*.

shame of different kinds.

So do these texts dismantle our methodology for understanding Minimalism as a literature of control and shame? They certainly pose a challenge, but are so frequently included in the conversation of Minimalist literature that they cannot be ignored. Our understanding of Minimalism from the readings of Carver, Hempel, Beattie and Didion revealed that the shame of being judged for experiences that reflect on their personal worth drive them to exercise a control over their stories that results in the Minimalist aesthetic. Barthelme's short story does not concern the state of the individual, but rather focuses on a shame he feels about an entire culture, which allows him to explore what about that culture makes him feel ashamed. In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer is not concerned about being unfairly judged, but that his characters — which occupy a variety of social statuses — will be. Shame is undoubtedly present within them and their authors undoubtedly respond to it by exercising the same kind of control that Carver and others do. The fact that these works uphold the methodology of shame and control but are rooted in the ideologies of Postmodernism and New Journalism suggests that this methodology — while most applicable to the prominent Minimalists I reviewed earlier — is far-reaching and flexible enough to conform to Minimalist works arising from a variety of cultural contexts.

Conclusion

If we return to Gordon Lish's story, "Fear: Four Examples," we see that the three characteristics critics use to understand it are only a shadow of Minimalism's actual construction. Lish's story allowed us to identify critics' understanding of Minimalism as having a reduced or simplified narrative structure and style of prose, as well as a focus on the private life of the "common" lower- and middle-class individual. These characteristics hold true quite often, but they also feel like generalizations that neglect to acknowledge the intricacies of the literature. In addition, they reflect critics' failure to identify the motivation behind these creative choices. I sought out a motivation with the help of critics like Mark McGurl and the resistance of ones like John Aldridge, which allowed me to explain the creative choices that supported that critical consensus, and to poke some much-needed holes in it as well.

It seems that Minimalism is not a literature that can be defined by its smallness, its state of being "minimal" or its absence of what the reader might find in other fiction. Such things are only the byproducts of a different authorial intent. I argued that Minimalism is founded on an author's attempt to control the representation of an experience to protect against the possibility that it will be judged by the reader in a way that will conjure the emotion of shame within the author. The central figures producing Minimalist fiction in the 1970s and '80s not only demonstrated that the focus of their literature is the control of shame, but that control can foster a Minimalist aesthetic while not omitting narrative elements at all. The propensity for authors to write about their own lived experiences during this point in literary history means that the shame I located in these stories was rooted in a personal, individual wellbeing. The control authors exercise over their fiction gives it a voyeuristic quality that I argued is indicative of how they were negotiating and protecting the value of those individual, personal experiences within a culture that did not. As a result, we should

now be able to take a more systematic approach to reading the majority of the Minimalist literature of this time period, with a method for comprehending all of the various creative choices that come to shape it, how those choices affect our reading experience and how we can infer understanding about the larger cultural context in which these works were written based off of that reading experience.

Additionally, examining works that posed challenges to my understanding revealed that this method of understanding shame has far-reaching applications. We saw how Donald Barthelme's work did not center its narrative around his personal, individual experience, but on the cultural landscape. In Norman Mailer's novel, *The Executioner's Song*, the nature of New Journalism meant that Mailer was not personally connected to the events he was reporting on, even if he was doing so in a creative, fictionalized manner. Yet in each of these texts, new kinds of shame and control arose, demonstrating that there is room for future scholarship to explore the application of this methodology onto Minimalist works of different, if not all, cultural frameworks and time periods.

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