Elephant

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAYMOND CARVER

Raymond Carver was born to a working-class family, the son of a sawmill worker. He married young, just out of high school, and supported his family by working a series of jobs: gas station attendant, janitor, and delivery man. He became interested in writing after taking a college-level creative writing class, and soon his stories began to appear in magazines. His first successful short story collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet Please?*, cemented his reputation and allowed him to focus on writing. He eventually landed a job teaching creative writing at the University of Texas at El Paso, and then at Syracuse University. Throughout his life, Carver battled alcoholism, an addiction that frequently resulted in stays at the hospital. At the age of fifty, he died from lung cancer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much of Carver's work focuses on the social and economic effects of poverty in blue-collar America. Though the 1980s is often remembered for its materialism and consumerism, the decade is also characterized by a decrease in wages for low-income Americans. Ronald Reagan's economic plan, called Reaganomics, centered the idea that money from the wealthiest Americans would trickle down to the poorest Americans. Yet, these benefits failed to materialize for many working-class Americans. Additionally, the fall of import prices in the 1980s led to deindustrialization, as many American factories moved production overseas, resulting in large-scale layoffs. The switch from an industrial to a service economy broke up many existing labor unions, causing union membership to fall drastically. In sum, working-class Americans were facing a decrease in wages, less powerful unions to defend them, and mass layoffs, which is reflected in the family's hardship in "Elephant."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Carver's realist style, known as minimalism, prioritized brevity. Perhaps the writer who most influenced Carver was Earnest Hemingway, who was known for his terse style. Hemingway's novels, like *The Old Man and the Sea*, feature the same simple, concise language that would later characterize Carver's work. Nearly all of Carver's stories, including his two most famous collections, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and *Cathedral*, focus on blue-collar America. They often depict characters who struggle with addiction or other self-destructive behaviors. After Carver's success many American writers adopted his minimalist style, albeit with their own twists. Tobias Wolff's first story collection, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, was lumped together with Carver's work under a label called "Dirty Realism" for its grittiness and unadorned language.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Elephant
- **When Written:** 1988
- **When Published:** 1988
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Minimalism
- **Setting:** A working-class American town
- **Climax:** The narrator has two dreams that reframe his idea of dependency
- **Antagonist:** Financial strain
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Editing Controversy. Raymond Carver's original, unedited stories are quite different from how they mostly appear in print: his longtime editor, Gordon Lish, controversially altered Carver's work by changing character names, modifying endings, and, in two cases, cutting a story's length by seventy-five percent.

PLOT SUMMARY

The unnamed narrator of "Elephant" is supporting his whole family. His brother got laid off, and now he needs money or he's going to lose his house. The narrator's mother needs a check every month because she's too old to work. His children aren't doing well either: his daughter has a deadbeat husband who refuses to work, and his son accrued a huge amount of debt while in college. Finally, the narrator must pay alimony to his ex-wife every month. That's five people.

The narrator works tirelessly to make enough money to support his family. He's exhausted when he gets home from work, and he has to give up things he enjoys doing in order to save money; he no longer goes out to eat or to the theater to see a movie. He begins to resent his family for the financial strain they place on him, and he fantasizes about moving to Australia to escape.

One night, the narrator has a dream about his father, whom he hasn't thought about in a long time. In the dream, the narrator is a child again, and he's riding on top of his father's shoulders.

His father has a firm grip around his ankles and makes him feel supported; the narrator imagines that he's riding an **elephant** and holds his arms up on either side. The narrator wakes up, then falls back asleep and has a second dream. He relives a time when he drunkenly kicked in the window of his son's car, and then threatened to kill him. He wakes up in a cold sweat and reflects that drinking alcohol is the thing that scares him most—it was rock bottom.

The narrator decides to walk to work that morning. As he walks, he no longer thinks of his family only in terms of the money that they owe him; rather, he rediscovers the love that he has for each of them and wishes them well. He realizes that his place is here, supporting his family—moving to Australia was a ridiculous idea.

One of his coworkers sees the narrator on the road and stops to pick him up. The coworker has just borrowed money from the bank to overhaul his **car**. The narrator tells the coworker to drive faster—he wants to see what this car can do. They speed off together, toward the mountains, in that big unpaid-for car.

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The story's unnamed narrator is a working-class man with an unspecified factory job. He works very hard, lives alone, and he's always sending checks to his mother, ex-wife, daughter, son, and brother, who can't afford to pay their bills without his help. At first, it's not clear why the narrator feels obligated to support them, but the narrator used to be a volent alcoholic, and it's likely that his drinking alienated his family, causing his wife to divorce him and his children to move in with her. Therefore, the narrator seems to see financially supporting his family as a way to make amends. Nonetheless, he still sends the money begrudgingly, resenting his burdensome family and lamenting the things he can't afford to do for himself, like see a movie or fix his shoes. But the narrator has a change of heart after he has two dreams based on memories from his past: one in which he's on his father's shoulders, and another in which he drunkenly threatens his son. The dream of his father makes him realize how good it feels to be supported (and therefore the good he's doing for his family by giving them money), and the dream of his son reminds him that he, too, has had low points. After waking from these dreams, the narrator's attitude shifts: suddenly he's full of love for his family and his burdens don't seem so heavy.

Billy – Billy is the narrator's brother, who is in rough financial shape. At the beginning of the story, he asks the narrator for money because he recently got laid off from his job at a fiberglass insulation plant, his unemployment benefits are running out and he's selling his belongings to keep the bank from repossessing his house. While he claims that he'll repay the narrator and that he has plans to get back on his feet financially, those plans never pan out—his situation goes from bad to worse. Billy's character highlights the difficulty that blue-collar Americans face when trying to recover from financial hardship. Merely getting laid off from his job destroyed his stable middle-class existence, leaving him with no recourse besides asking his brother for money.

The Narrator's Mother – The narrator's mother is another recipient of the narrator's monthly checks. Now in her 70s, she's retired and she suffers from an unspecified illness, so she relies on the narrator's financial support. While she sometimes asks about the well-being of her family, these considerations always seem secondary to questions about money. The narrator initially derides her as "poor and greedy," but in the end he reflects on how lucky he is to still have her.

The Narrator's Daughter –The narrator's daughter is another person whom the narrator financially supports. She lives with her two kids and deadbeat husband in a trailer, and she keeps telling the narrator that she just needs a little more money to get back on her feet. Eventually, the narrator's daughter takes a job working long shifts at a salmon cannery, but she need money to pay a babysitter who can watch her kids all day. During her first day at the cannery, someone breaks into her trailer and steals all the furniture. Her husband is nowhere to be found, so she asks the narrator for more money to replace what was stolen.

The Narrator's Son — The narrator's son is also on the narrator's "payroll." He goes to college in New Hampshire, for which he's accrued a large amount of debt. He believes that America is a materialist society where people can't hold a conversation unless money is somehow involved. Instead, he wants to live in Germany, where he spent a semester studying abroad, so he asks the narrator to pay for the plane ticket. Like the narrator's daughter, the narrator's son attempts to achieve upward economic mobility: he's the first person in his family to go to college. But things don't work out for him. His education results in so much debt that he becomes disillusioned with America, and the narrator resents his son for going to school at all.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DEPENDENCY

The unnamed narrator of "Elephant" has a lot of responsibility. He's always writing checks to various family members in need: his brother Billy is going to

lose his house, his retired mother is too old to work, his ex-wife is entitled to alimony, his daughter has two kids and a layabout husband, and his son is in debt from school. Practically all of the narrator's money goes to his family—he can't afford to eat out or see a movie, let alone fix a hole in his shoe or go to the dentist. And throughout most of the story, the narrator's thoughts of his family are consumed by his resentment of their dependence on him (which he sees as neediness and irresponsibility) and his bitterness that their needs mean de-prioritizing his own.

But the narrator's attitude begins to change after two dreams in the same night make him reconsider his notion of dependency. In the first, he's a child being carried on his father's shoulders—his father is physically supporting him, just as the narrator now financially supports his family—and it's an experience of pure joy. The dream reminds the narrator that he was once dependent on his father, as many others in their family were, and it helps the narrator recognize the comfort and security that his support gives to those he loves. In the narrator's second dream, he relives a memory from the days when he was a violent alcoholic, one in which he drunkenly threatened his son. The narrator's dependency in this context is on alcohol, and it led to the dissolution of his family. Seeing how his own dependency wrecked his life gives him more empathy for various members of his family—he was at rock bottom then, and they're at rock bottom now. They need him, and he's in a position to help.

After these two dreams, the narrator's attitude transforms. As he thinks of his family while walking to work, he's no longer consumed by calculating his debts or judging their choices. Instead, he focuses on the love that he has for his family and his good wishes for their lives. When he thinks of them this way, his own problems don't seem so bad—he can go without milk for his coffee, and he can walk to work in the sunshine to save on gas. This ending reconfigures dependency as a type of relationship that can be loving and meaningful, not simply a symptom of a person's recklessness or bad morals.

MONEY AND HARDSHIP

The narrator and his family are working-class people, and it's a difficult life. Though the narrator never mentions where he works, he works hard all day, returns home, and doesn't even have the energy to watch television or take off his shoes. Similarly, the narrator's daughter gets a job at a salmon cannery. She insists that she's "young and strong" and plans to work twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. This could be an exaggeration designed to manipulate the narrator into writing more checks, but this family unmistakably represents blue-collar America: people who earn money through hard manual labor.

When the narrator and his family fall on hard times, it becomes clear that there isn't a good path out of financial instability for people of their economic class. Each time one of his family members tries to get back on their feet, they fail and end up relying on the narrator for another check. While the narrator's daughter is working at the cannery, burglars break into her house and steal all her furniture. His son goes to college, and though education is an oft-touted method of breaking into the middle class, he accrues a mountain of debt before graduation. Every step forward results in two steps backward—and more debt.

In a way, the family's dependence on the narrator is an indictment of the American system—his mother should be able to live in retirement without depending on her son, his brother shouldn't have his life ruined because his company downsized leaving him unable to pay his mortgage, his son should be able to go to college without being crushed by debt, and his daughter should have childcare so she can work. But American capitalism doesn't provide those resources, so the narrator himself is forced to keep his family from destitution, which he himself can't even afford.

DRUDGERY VS. ESCAPE

Throughout "Elephant," the narrator is caught in black-and-white thinking about his life. He believes that he has two choices: either he can submit to his family's relentless dependence on him and therefore live a life of drudgery, or he can make a spectacular escape by fleeing the country and not telling anyone where he is. For most of the story, it doesn't seem to occur to the narrator that there might be other options—that his only choices are not to either submit to misery or run away to **Australia**, and that he might find happiness simply by thinking differently about his situation.

To the narrator, Australia is a symbol of freedom, but mostly because it's so geographically far from his home in the United States. He admits that he doesn't know the first thing about Australia, and he has no specific fantasies about what he would do there. He doesn't want to go to Australia to seek a particular life—he sees Australia only as an escape, a way to put the most possible distance between himself and his problems. This kind of escape clearly won't bring him what he's looking for—and in fact, the narrator doesn't "beg[i]n to feel better" until he has realized that he doesn't actually want to go to Australia at all.

But when the narrator realizes that he doesn't want to go to Australia, he's not accepting that he'll be miserable forever—he's actually escaping the false binary between drudgery and fleeing, thereby reframing the way he thinks about his life. At the end of the story, he begins to see himself not as a victim of his family's incompetence and irresponsibility, but rather as a lucky man with a stable life and people who love him. So he escapes from drudgery not by fleeing the country, but by realizing that he is capable and willing to help.

GUILT AND RESPONSIBILITY

Despite his vague fantasies of fleeing to Australia, the narrator seems to see it as inevitable that he will support his family for as long as they ask. But for much of the story, it's not clear *why* he feels compelled to support them. Why does he seem unable to tell his son that he can't go to Europe or to tell his brother that he needs to get a job? The narrator frames himself as being powerless in the face of his obligations ("I had to help her," he says, or "What else could I do?"), but midway through the story it becomes clear that the narrator's feeling of powerlessness is actually covering up his guilt.

In a dream, the narrator relives a real memory of drunkenly kicking through the window of his son's car and threatening to kill him. From this, it's shown that the narrator used to be a violent alcoholic, and the implication is that his family dissolved as a result—his wife divorced him and his children went to stay with her. It also seems possible that the narrator's drunken violence contributed to his son's mental health issues. This helps readers understand why the narrator feels so responsible for financially supporting his family: he hurt them profoundly in the past. He can't fix what he's done, but he seems to see the financial support as a form of atonement, a way to assuage his guilt and take belated responsibility for his actions.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ELEPHANT

When the narrator dreams of riding on his father's shoulders, he compares it to riding an elephant, which he associates with security and support. When the narrator has this dream, he's feeling tremendous strain and resentment from financially supporting his family. But the dream of riding on his father's shoulders makes him realize what he's providing for others: the joy and safety he felt as a child while supported by his father. The dream allows the narrator to reframe his position in life: he's not being taken advantage of by his feckless relatives, but rather he's the elephant on whose back they can ride, giving them the support he himself once enjoyed. In this way, the elephant comes to symbolize a willingness to bear the weight of others.

AUSTRALIA

The narrator's fantasy of changing his name and moving to Australia exemplifies the faulty way he thinks about his current situation. He believes that he has only two choices: he can continue laboring to support his family's demands, or he can escape his family's dependency by moving to Australia. Put another way, he believes his choice is between drudgery and escape. As the narrator admits, he doesn't "know the first thing about Australia." To him, it symbolizes freedom—it's nothing more than a country far away from his problems. But when the narrator realizes that he doesn't actually want to move to Australia, it's not that he's giving up his freedom. Rather, he understands that he's been unfairly interpreting his relationship with his family: they're not parasites living off his hard-earned cash, they're people who love him. The narrator realizes that his place is here, helping his family through a difficult time.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Where I'm Calling From* published in 1988.

Elephant Quotes

He told me he'd hurt his back carrying the TV up and down the street where the pawnshops did business. He went from place to place, he said, trying to get the best offer.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Billy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 386

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's brother, Billy, has asked to borrow five hundred dollars from the narrator because he was recently laid off from his job and he wants to keep his house out of foreclosure. This quote shows just how destabilizing this job loss has been: his new financial insecurity means he might lose his house, which is why he has started pawning his belongings, which leads him to hurt his back. It's a downward spiral, all stemming from a job loss that wasn't even Billy's fault.

In this way, the story is subtly critiquing American society for leaving people like Billy so dependent on jobs that were, at the time when this story was published, rapidly disappearing. In the 80s, many plants like Billy's were moving overseas, which meant that many American workers got laid off. Factory jobs used to be stable, middle-class jobs, but the story is depicting a moment in time when that was changing. Without good jobs, people like Billy fell from the middle class, which the story shows had consequences not just for the workers themselves, but for their families.

> I got up early every morning and went to work and worked hard all day. When I came home I plopped into the big chair and just sat there. I was so tired it took me a while to unlace my shoes.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 389

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has just learned that his brother will not be able to pay back the narrator's loan, and this passage illuminates what this means for him. The narrator is not a wealthy man, and he earns what money he does have through grueling physical labor. Earning money takes so much out of the narrator that it's not easy for him to part with this money to help Billy, which helps explain some of his resentment.

The narrator embodies the American virtue of working hard to make a living, but his work is so intense that he seems hardly alive while he's at home, which casts doubt on whether hard work for its own sake is a worthwhile goal. This image of the narrator sitting inert in his armchair can be contrasted with an image of him sitting in a different chair at the end of the story: the passenger seat of George's car as they speed down the road. When the narrator is exhausted in his armchair, he's so consumed by his financial responsibility that he can't enjoy his life. But the later scene in the car shows that even without his financial situation changing, he can find joy in his life simply by de-emphasizing money and responsibility and instead letting himself live in the moment.

> Once, long ago, when I used to think like a man about these things, I threatened to kill that guy. But that's neither here nor there. Besides, I was drinking in those days.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 389

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, in which the narrator confesses that he once threatened to kill his daughter's deadbeat husband, is the first hint of the narrator's past dependence on alcohol, and of how violent he used to become when he was drunk. His threat to murder his son-in-law mirrors the threat readers later learn that he once made against his son, suggesting that violence used to be a routine part of his family's life. This gives a clue as to why the narrator feels so compelled to give his family money, even as it burdens him: perhaps he feels guilty and is trying to make amends.

Additionally, this passage and its surrounding context demonstrates the narrator's understanding of masculinity. He calls his daughter's husband a "swine" because he doesn't look for work and can't hold a job, showing that the narrator links manhood and virtue to labor. Furthermore, he admits that he threatened to kill his son-in-law back when he "used to think like a man," which associates masculinity with violence. However, when the narrator later dreams about his father, he's reminded of a type of masculinity that's defined by security and a willingness to support others. This allows him to become a gentler, kinder man.

> But he was the first kid in the family, on either side of the family, to even want to go to college, so everybody thought it was a good idea. I thought so, too, at first. How'd I know it was going to wind up costing me an arm and a leg? He borrowed left and right from the banks to keep himself going. [...]But after he'd borrowed everything he could, everything in sight, including enough to finance a junior year in Germany, I had to begin sending him money, and a lot of it. When, finally, I said I couldn't send any more, he wrote back and said if that was the case, if that was really the way I felt, he was going to deal drugs or else rob a bank—whatever he had to do to get money to live on.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Son

Related Themes:

Page Number: 391

Explanation and Analysis

While going to college is widely considered to be the best way to attain upward class mobility, the narrator's son's story proves otherwise. Initially, the narrator thought that sending his son to college might be a boon to the family, securing at least one of them a place in the middle class. But college ended up leaving the narrator's son in a tremendous amount of debt that he's unable to pay, which has led him to become a financial burden on the narrator. The narrator clearly resents this, which is evident in the tone of his remark about his son's education costing him an arm and a

leg.

This predicament is not entirely the narrator's son's fault, as he made what most people would consider a wise decision in striving to attend college, and it backfired and left him worse off than he was before. When the narrator's son threatens to start robbing banks or dealing drugs to survive, he's being a little melodramatic, but it also makes clear that he feels out of options and, like Billy, doesn't see a good path to financial stability. College, then, is one of several avenues to class mobility that the story presents as a trap for lower-income Americans, an empty promise that leaves people worse off than they were before.

That'd be the big thing. It was going to require a special kind of sitter, seeing as how the hours would be long and the kids were hyper to begin with, because of all the Popsicles and Tootsie Rolls, M&M's, and the like that they put away every day.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 393

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator threatens to move to Australia, his daughter responds that she's decided to get a job at a salmon cannery to ease the burden on her dad. She plans to work grueling twelve-hour-a-day shifts, seven days a week, to try to make ends meet but—in an incredible irony—she can't actually afford to take this job without more assistance from the narrator, because she needs to hire a babysitter for her children. Even though the narrator's daughter earnestly wants to make a living and support her family, there's no affordable childcare option available to her—so she needs her dad to front her money until she can pay for the rest of it out of her meager paycheck. American society valorizes working hard and pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, but this passage punctures that notion by showing that some lower-income people are locked out of this dream. This is particularly true of American women, who have long been kept out of the workforce by the expense of childcare, which the government and private employers typically do not subsidize.

There's one other noteworthy detail here: the food that the narrator's grandchildren eat is cheap but not very nutritious. This hints at another common parenting tradeoff in which families sometimes must feed their children food that's bad for them because it's all they can afford.

Everything in the trailer. Every stick of furniture was gone when she came home from work after her first night at the cannery. There wasn't even a chair left for her to sit down on.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Daughter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 396

Explanation and Analysis

Just after the narrator learns that his brother won't be able to pay back the thousand dollars that the narrator lent him, his daughter calls to tell him that her trailer has been burglarized. The narrator's daughter had done everything right to try to stabilize her family financially: she took a hard job, she hired a babysitter for the kids, and she bought the equipment that she needed for work. Yet, none of it mattered. She's returned to a position of dependency on her father because someone broke into her house. Indeed, this story is full of similar cases of working-class people trying to find a way out of financial instability only to be felled by forces outside of their control.

The image of an empty house recurs throughout "Elephant." The daughter's house stands empty after it's burglarized, and Billy's house stands empty after he's forced to sell his possessions to make his mortgage payment. Just as other parts of this story have targeted American virtues like education and hard work, the empty house motif reveals that the American dream is unobtainable for many working-class Americans, often for reasons they have no control over.

This was a materialist society, and he simply couldn't take it anymore. People over here, in the U.S., couldn't hold a conversation unless money figured in it some way, and he was sick of it.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Son

Related Themes:

Page Number: 396

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the narrator's account of a letter he received from his son, a college graduate suffocated with debt who has decided that he needs money to move to Europe. The narrator's son's remarks ring a little hollow, as he himself seems a bit obsessed with money—he doesn't seem to ever talk to his dad about anything besides his need for funds, and he's so freaked out by being in debt that he threatens to do rash things like rob banks. Nonetheless, his comments encapsulate a key idea of the story: that living one's life thinking constantly about money is miserable.

The narrator himself is unable to have a conversation with his family without feeling resentment or bitterness over the money that they owe him, and it's preventing him from enjoying his life and loving his family. While his son's desire to move to Germany is extreme, his desire to escape a materialist mindset is wise. At the end of the story, the narrator begins to realize this when he lets go of his anxiety about money and finally begins to feel gratitude for his life and love for his family.

❝ Then I did let go. I turned loose and held my arms out to either side of me. I kept them out there like that for balance. My dad went on walking while I rode on his shoulders. I pretended he was an elephant.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 397

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator's mother writes him lamenting that she's unable to save any money for the future, the narrator goes to sleep and experiences a reprieve from his suffering in a dream. This dream (which is actually reliving a childhood memory) is one in which he's supported by someone else—his father, who he thinks of as a source of strength and security. He experiences a sense of joy and balance on top of his father's shoulders. Rather than feeling like he's being pulled down, as he told his brother, he's being lifted up. He compares riding on his father's shoulders to riding an elephant, which makes the elephant a symbol of security and reliability in this story. The narrator could ride an elephant and feel supported, much like his family treats *him* like an elephant for support.

This dream helps the narrator realize what he's providing for others. His brother, mother, and children can feel the same joy he felt in his dream because of the monthly financial support that the narrator provides them. Thus, he reconceptualizes his family's dependency: they're not manipulative people trying to get more money from him, they're desperate and in need of the kind of the support that the narrator received from his own father.

❝ Drinking that whiskey was the thing that scared me. That was the worst thing that could have happened. That was rock bottom. Compared to that, everything else was a picnic.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 398

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the narrator's second dream, just after he sees his family on a picnic before he and his ex-wife divorced. The sequence of this dream is significant; he dreams first of an idyllic family picnic, and then of a time when he kicked in his son's car window and threatened his life. The shift from the first scene to the second is caused by alcohol: in the former he is sober, and in the latter he is drunk. Thus, for the first time in the story it becomes abundantly clear that the narrator bears some responsibility for the dissolution of his family and is probably supporting them financially because he feels that he needs to make amends.

The narrator calls his former dependency on alcohol "rock bottom." This is a moment of realization; the narrator had previously accused his family of "pulling" him down, but through this dream, the narrator remembers what it actually means to be down. Despite the checks that he sends to his family, his current life is, as he says, a "picnic." Having to give up going out to eat, or not being able to afford fixing the hole in his shoe, is nothing when compared to how he and his family suffered due to his old dependency on alcohol.

❝ Hell, I didn't want to go to Australia. But once I understood this, once I understood I wouldn't be going there—or anywhere else, for that matter—I began to feel better.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 398

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator wakes up from his second dream he grabs a coffee, sits at his kitchen table, and has this realization. Australia has been the narrator's escape fantasy—it was a faraway place where the narrator could get away from the financial demands of his family. He resented them because he saw their financial difficulties as the primary source of misery in his life. They were greedy, or irresponsible, or lazy, and he was the one who had to work hard and shell out his money to keep them afloat.

Now, however, the narrator understands that his place is just where he is: working to support his family. His real way to escape suffering isn't by moving halfway across the world to a country he knows nothing about—it's by reconceiving his relationship with his family and learning to be grateful for what he has. His family are people who are dependent on him for their survival, and, like his father, he learns to be happy to support them.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ELEPHANT

When the narrator's brother, Billy, asks to borrow money, the narrator knows he should say no. But he doesn't want Billy to lose his house, and besides, Billy swears he'll pay it all back.

The narrator feels obligated to support his family, even though he knows it's wiser not to lend money that he's not sure Billy can pay back. Since Billy is at risk of losing his house, the stakes of this loan are high, and the narrator seems to feel that he can make a real difference by taking a risk on lending the money to potentially help Billy keep his home.

Last year, Billy got laid off from the plant where he worked, and now he's spent through his savings, exhausted his unemployment, and lost his insurance. His wife is diabetic, and he's been pawning his things trying to make ends meet. So the narrator sends him $500. He feels that he has to do it.

Billy's job at the plant was clearly providing him a middle-class life, as he owns a home and even had money saved before he was laid off. But the layoff has been destabilizing—it's led to a desperate financial situation in which his wife can't get medical care without him pawning his belongings to pay the cost. Billy's situation shows that a simple job loss that wasn't even his fault can be enough to bump someone from the middle class, emphasizing how precarious the lives of middle- and working-class people are.

The narrator tells Billy to pay the money back not to him, but to their mother, who is "poor and greedy." For years, the narrator has been sending her money every month, so he tells both her and Billy that he's not going to send that money for a while, and Billy will pay it instead to take care of his debt to the narrator. Their mother is suspicious, so the narrator promises that if Billy falls through, he'll still send her money.

The narrator's attitude towards his mother is clearly resentful: rather than giving her money happily out of love, he calls her "poor and greedy." This gives readers a clue about how heavily his family burdens weigh on him. The narrator's mother also notably seems to lack compassion for Billy and the narrator's financial situations—rather than being concerned about whether Billy will lose his house or whether the narrator can afford to support both her and Billy, she seems simply concerned about her own well-being, asking nervously about how she'll get her money if Billy falls through. This demonstrates the extent to which financial concern dominates the family's relationships.

But in the next three months, Billy only pays her a fraction of the money, so the narrator has to keep sending her checks. When the narrator follows up with Billy, Billy says he's a "goner"—he's selling his house, he's already pawned all his belongings except the table and chairs, and his tax refund got seized. He wishes he could sell his blood, but alas, the narrator's money is gone.

When the narrator follows up about the money Billy hasn't repaid, he's met with a wild tale of woe. The story never reveals whether or not what Billy says is true—whether he has really lost his house and all his belongings and his tax refund, or whether he's simply playing the narrator for sympathy. It might be a bit of both—clearly, the narrator's family feels entitled to lean on him, but they also do seem to all be experiencing one kind of hardship or another, as the story will go on to show.

Every day, the narrator works hard, comes home, and collapses into his armchair, too tired to even turn on the TV. He can't feel too sorry for Billy because he's got so many issues of his own: in addition to supporting his mother, he's sending money to a few other people. One is his ex-wife, and another is his daughter and her two kids.

This passage makes clear that the narrator can't really afford to support his whole family, even as they all demand his help. He's not a wealthy man (he seems to be lower middle-class, as Billy was before losing his job), and working enough to support his family is physically exhausting to him. Having so many troubles of his own makes him less empathetic to Billy, since he doesn't feel like he has the bandwidth to worry about Billy on top of all his own problems. Sending money seems to be all he has room for.

His daughter's husband refuses to work, which enrages the narrator—he once threatened to kill his son-in-law, but that was back when the narrator was drinking. Lately, his daughter sends letters asking for money to hold her over until she can find a job herself, so the narrator sends the money. He's lucky compared to her and compared to his other relatives. He has a job, after all.

While the narrator currently suffers from the dependency that all his family members have on him, he used to suffer from a different kind of dependency: alcoholism. He admits that drinking made him violent, which hints at a possible reason that the narrator feels so obligated to help his family: perhaps he's making amends. It's also noteworthy that the narrator is so enraged by his son-in-law's refusal to work. While the narrator may feel guilty about his past drunken behavior, he at least takes pride in earning a living and supporting the people he loves.

The narrator's son needs money, too. He's in college in New Hampshire—the first in their family to go beyond high school—but he's up to his ears in debt. After his son hit his credit limit financing a year abroad in Germany, the narrator started sending money—his son threatened to start dealing drugs or rob a bank if he didn't. So what else could the narrator do? He already has "plenty" on his conscience.

The narrator's son attempts to rise in economic position through education, yet this pursuit leaves him with an enormous amount of debt. Though it may be ridiculous that he threatens to deal drugs or rob a bank, it nonetheless suggests that he is out of options—he sees no legitimate way to get out of debt and join the middle class. The narrator admits straightforwardly here that he's supporting his son out of guilt over his past actions—he has "plenty" on his conscience (possibly related to drunken behavior), so he feels obligated to try to keep his son afloat.

As his financial obligations continue to grow, the narrator takes out a loan so he can continue to send his family money. He worries night and day, and he loses sleep over his growing debt. To save money he cuts back on personal expenses: he stops eating out and going to the movie theatre. He doesn't buy himself new clothes, or get his teeth fixed, or fix the hole in his shoe.

This passage makes clear that supporting his family is taking a huge toll on the narrator. Sending the money isn't an easy way to clear his conscience: it affects every part of his life, causing him great distress. The narrator clearly can't support this many people comfortably, but he also hasn't put a stop to it, which suggests that whatever is motivating him (perhaps his guilt) is incredibly powerful.

Fed up with his family's demands, the narrator fantasizes about moving to **Australia**. He writes his family letters in which he threatens to quit his job, change his name, and move across the world.

The narrator thinks about his family's dependency in starkly black-and-white terms: he can either submit to their demands or flee them entirely. Australia becomes a symbol of freedom for the narrator, a place that is far away from his family and his problems. But it's also not a realistic escape, and it doesn't reflect a realistic view of the situation: there are plenty of less extreme ways to stop paying his family so much money than moving to Australia.

The narrator doesn't think his family takes his threat to move to **Australia** very seriously. His mother writes him back first, saying that she'll go out and look for work as soon as the swelling in her legs goes down. She's seventy-five years old, but she can still wait tables. The narrator responds, telling her not to be silly. He's happy to help her by continuing to send money.

The narrator's mother is old and has a medical condition that prevents her from working. Yet, without the support of the narrator, she would be forced to wait tables to survive. This hints at how bad it would be if the narrator really did move to Australia—his family would likely be in a lot of trouble without his support, even if he's not always happy to give it.

Next, the narrator gets a letter from his daughter. She knows that her dad needs a break, so she decides to take a job at a salmon cannery. She plans to work the twelve to fourteen hour-a-day shifts, seven days a week. She'll need to find a babysitter willing to work long hours, though, and she'll need to buy special boots and clothes.

The narrator's daughter understands the burden she's placing on her dad, and she seems to genuinely want to alleviate it. But her best option is a bad one: working long hours at a grueling job for low wages while also having to pay for childcare. It's pretty clear that this job won't lead to upward mobility. In order to earn money, the narrator's daughter first needs to spend money on clothes and childcare, which highlights the trap in which working-class people often find themselves.

The narrator's son responds melodramatically, threatening to end his life to not be a burden on his father. His plan to deal drugs won't work, he claims, because he's allergic to cocaine. He includes with the letter a photo of himself standing under a big tree in Germany.

The narrator's son got a college education but still has no clear pathway out of debt and into a good career, showing how trapped many members of the working class are. But here, the narrator's son also seems a bit melodramatic and manipulative. Nonetheless, the narrator plans to keep sending money, which shows just how powerful his guilt must be.

On a beautiful day in early May, as the weather is beginning to warm, the narrator sits in his home with the windows open and radio playing. The phone rings, and the narrator begins to sweat when he answers and hears his brother's voice. They start talking, and the narrator tells his brother about his and his family's financial hardship. In the middle of the conversation the narrator wonders who will pay for the phone call.

The narrator's relationship with his family is hitting a low point: he can't even hear his brother's voice without sweating from stress and thinking about money. He seems unconcerned with his brother's well-being—instead, his thoughts are consumed by worry and resentment.

The narrator runs out of things to say. He stares out the window, waiting—he knows what's about to happen. And then it does: his brother asks him for a thousand dollars. Bill collectors hammer at his door, he says, and threaten to take his house away. "Help me, brother," he pleads.

Billy's situation seems to have deteriorated, despite the narrator's previous loan. That loan was supposed to keep Billy's life from falling apart, but instead things have just gotten worse, meaning that Billy is back for more oney. The narrator clearly suffers because he has to spend so much on his family, but Billy is suffering, too.

The narrator reminds Billy that he never paid their mother the money that he owes her. Why would he lend him even more money? They're all going under, and they're pulling the narrator down with them. But Billy promises that he'll be good for the money this time. He's got a job lined up; he'll have to drive fifty miles roundtrip, but it's worth it. He proposes that they should exchange checks, and that the narrator should wait two months before cashing his. The narrator laments that he's "carrying a very heavy load these days," but he finally agrees to his brother's proposal.

The narrator does not focus on the fact that he's helping members of his family who are in need, rather he laments that they are pulling him down with them. His remark about "carrying a heavy load" foreshadows a dream that he is about to have, and it further exemplifies the bitter feelings he has about his family. Finally, that Billy considers a job with a fifty mile commute a good opportunity suggests how desperate he is, and how few opportunities exist for him.

The narrator waits the two months to cash his brother's check. But right before he cashes the check, Billy writes and tells him that his job fell through at the last minute. He doesn't have any money, and he begs the narrator to wait a while longer before cashing the check.

Just like last time, the narrator's loan cannot stop Billy's life from spiraling downwards. This shows just how hard it is for people to make a life—Billy is fortunate to have a relative to rely on, but not even that can help him.

Then, during her first night of work at the cannery, someone breaks into the narrator's daughter's trailer and steals all her furniture. She doesn't even have a bed for her children to sleep in. Even though he doesn't have a job or any responsibilities, her husband was nowhere to be found when the crime was committed, and he still can't be found. She hopes that he's "at the bottom of a river." She asks the narrator for money to replace the stolen furniture.

The narrator's daughter had hoped to get ahead through her grueling labor at the cannery. Though she tried to earn money on her own, she continues to be hindered by forces outside of her control: it's not her fault that someone burglarized her trailer, but now she's even further in debt than she was before she started working. Her story emphasizes the difficulty working-class Americans face when trying to rise in economic position.

The narrator's son asks the narrator to pay for a plane ticket to Germany— it's essential that he move to Europe. He can't stand to live in America any longer. He calls America a "materialist society" where people can't "hold a conversation unless money figured in it some way."

While the narrator's son's complaints about American materialism ring a little hollow (all he does is ask his dad for money—they never seem to have any other interactions), he's also hitting on something that's true. The narrator has been so consumed by his financial dramas that he has forgotten what's at the core of family: love and support. Money has infected the narrator's life, and as the story's ending shows, he would benefit from remembering that other things are important, too.

The narrator does not hear from his ex-wife. They both know how things stand, so there's no reason for them to speak.

The narrator seems to be on the hook for alimony payments as a part of their divorce. Since he's legally bound to pay her, they have no reason to speak—she doesn't have to beg him for money every month like his other family members.

The narrator's mother can't afford to buy support hose or have her hair tinted. She thought that this would be the year when she could finally save some money, but it doesn't seem that way anymore. The narrator continues to send checks in the mail, holding his breath and waiting.

Though she's ill and can't work, there's no government support system in place that would allow the narrator's mother to save an adequate amount of money. As a consequence, she's forced to be dependent on the narrator, which neither she nor the narrator likes.


One night, the narrator has a dream in which he relives a childhood memory of riding atop his father's shoulders. Though he's high off the ground, the narrator feels no fear because his father has a firm grip on his ankles. Secure in his father's grasp, the narrator lets go of his father's head and extends his arms out on both sides. While riding like this he pretends that his father is an **elephant**.

In this dream, the narrator experiences a reprieve. Instead of carrying all the burdens of his family's financial hardship on his own shoulders, the narrator rides on his father's shoulders, feeling a sense of joy and safety. He compares his father to an elephant, which becomes a symbol of security and support: someone who can bear the weight of others in order to make them feel free. Having this dream helps the narrator appreciate the importance of his role, as the story will go on to show.

When the narrator wakes up, he gets up to use the bathroom and decides to stay awake, since he has to get ready for work soon. He lies down in bed to think about his father, whom he hasn't thought about in a long time.

The narrator remembers his father as a man who could bear a heavy load. That he hasn't thought about his father in a long time suggests that the narrator has forgotten what his father provided for his family. Remembering his father spurs a reframing of the narrator's thoughts about his family's dependency, as will soon be demonstrated.

The narrator falls asleep again, having another dream. This one begins with an idyllic scene of his family on a picnic. The dream takes place before the narrator's divorce—his wife and small children are sitting on a blanket by a river, eating potato chips. The narrator feels a sense of satisfaction and well-being.

This idyllic, pastoral scene depicts a point in the narrator's life when he felt love for his family and when he was happy to provide for them. These feelings are what make the narrator experience satisfaction.

Suddenly the dream shifts, and the narrator relives a time when he drunkenly kicked in his son's car window, then threatened to kill him. He wakes with his heart racing and reflects that drinking in the dream was "the thing that scared him." He calls it the worst thing that could have happened—"rock bottom." Compared to that, everything else is a picnic.

This dream depicts a time when the narrator's dependency on alcohol had intense consequences for his family. It's a reversal: up until now, everyone has been dependent on the narrator, but here the narrator is the person with a dependency problem. This sets up the possibility for the narrator to develop an empathetic understanding of his family's current financial hardship: he was at rock bottom then, and they are at rock bottom now. Finally, this scene explains the narrator's feelings of intense guilt; he wrecked his family's lives because of his alcohol addiction, so he perhaps feels compelled to support them financially in order to make up for what he did to the family.

After he wakes up from his second dream the narrator sits at his kitchen table, has some coffee, and thinks about **Australia**. This time, however, he thinks about how it must have sounded to his family when he threatened to change his name and move. He recognizes that they were probably shocked and afraid at first, and then they must have laughed. Thinking about their laughter, the narrator laughs too.

The narrator begins to reconsider his notion of fleeing to Australia. For the first time he thinks empathetically—he sees things from his family's perspective and realizes that it's mean to threaten to cut them off, since he's the only person they can depend on, and his life is objectively more stable than theirs. Their laughter, though, hints at the absurdity of the threat in the first place. The narrator has never been to Australia and he has no reason to go there—cutting them off and moving was always an empty threat, which he realizes everyone else must know.

The narrator realizes that he doesn't want to go to **Australia** after all—he's comfortable where he is. This realization makes him feel better. He pours himself some more coffee, and although he typically takes milk and there isn't any, he doesn't care. He can go without milk in his coffee for a day.

The narrator realizes that his black-and-white way of viewing his family's dependency has been wrong all along. He failed to consider the possibility of reframing his own understanding of the situation; instead of choosing between submitting to his family's demands or escaping them, he now sees that he can simply be happy to support his family through their difficult times, even if that means giving up small things like milk in his coffee.

The narrator finishes his coffee and walks outside. He doesn't bother to lock his door, despite what happened to his daughter, because he recognizes that the things in his house are expendable. He doesn't actually need anything in there. He has a valuable television, but the idea of watching it sickens him. He'd be happy if someone stole it.

The narrator has reassessed his values and found that material possessions are less vital than he previously believed. He can go without watching T.V. or fixing the hole in his shoe if it means that he can continue to support his family.

The narrator decides to walk to work. Not only would he save some money on gas, but also he'd be able to enjoy the nice day. As he walks, he thinks once again about his family. He hopes that his son made it to Germany and found happiness there. He hopes that his daughter is doing okay, and he decides to write her a letter to wish her well. His thoughts turn to his mother, and he feels lucky that she remains in good health.

The narrator's attitude toward his family is no longer permeated with calculations about how much money they owe him. Rather, he recognizes the love that he has for them and genuinely wishes them well. He realizes that dependency is not necessarily a negative type of relationship—he wants to support his family through their difficult moments without bitterness or resentment because he loves them and because it brings his life meaning.

The narrator's path takes him next to the highway. He thinks about his brother and wishes him well. It doesn't matter if his brother can't pay the narrator back in time—he will when he gets the money. Finally, the narrator thinks fondly about his ex-wife. He remembers all the love he used to have for her and wishes her well too. Things could be a lot worse, he realizes. People's luck has gone south, but things are bound to change soon.

The narrator's recognition that his brother doesn't need to pay him back reinforces that his attitude toward his family's dependency has changed. Now that he has a more empathetic view of his family, his own problems no longer seem so bad. He also seems to have changed his notions of why his family is dependent in the first place. His resentment towards their needs suggested a view that their hardship was their fault, but now he seems to see that it's simply bad luck, which allows him feel grateful for his own life and think about repairing the family's relationships.

The narrator pauses in front of Smitty's, an old, boarded-up café. He stands still and lifts his arms up at his sides, level with his shoulders. While he's standing like that a coworker of his, George, pulls into the parking lot of the café and tells the narrator to get into the car.

The pose that the narrator takes in the parking lot of Smitty's is the same one that he took in his dream, when he was a child on top of his father's shoulders. He's letting go of the negativity that has characterized his relationships with his family and remembering a moment when dependency was positive and fulfilling. Rather than trying to escape, he's accepting his role as a provider and finding a sense of balance within that role.

The two begin driving towards work. George is driving fast, as if they are running late, but they aren't late. The narrator tells George that they have lots of time before they need to get to work.

The narrator demonstrates a new balance between life and work. Enjoying the time he has away from work will make him feel less miserable and less like he needs to escape.

George tells the narrator that he recently borrowed sone money to have his car overhauled. He speeds down the road, toward the mountains. The narrator fastens his seatbelt and tells George to drive faster. George floors it, and the two streak down the road in a big, unpaid-for car.

George overhauled his car by going into debt. While this isn't necessarily a responsible financial decision, it doesn't make the narrator uneasy, judgmental, or resentful. In contrast to his old attitude towards his family's financial woes, the narrator is now able to enjoy the fruits of George's recklessness and let go of the worries about money that were ruining his life.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Reuss, Josh. "*Elephant*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Apr 2022. Web. 28 Apr 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Reuss, Josh. "*Elephant*." LitCharts LLC, April 28, 2022. Retrieved April 28, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/elephant.

To cite any of the quotes from *Elephant* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Carver, Raymond. Elephant. Vintage. 1988.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Carver, Raymond. Elephant. New York: Vintage. 1988.