

JOYCE CAROL OATES AND THE DIMENSION OF VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

In the world of Joyce Carol Oates' novels, people make love, play pianos, and eat violently. Music explodes, grins shatter and grease spatters maliciously as Oates uses every rhetorical device at her command to create an explosive atmosphere. By not relying solely on the narration of violent actions but supplementing this with rhetorical violence, she succeeds in generating a highly charged fictional environment. Her narratives mirror the turbulence and disorder of this nightmarish world. By repeatedly describing even the most ordinary of human actions in terms of hostility, brutality, and truculence, Oates creates a totally violent fictive world. She repeatedly uses concentrations of violence in her works in order to direct her reader's attention away from the externals of American society to crucial underlying surges in the psyche. Much of the power of Oates' fiction lies in her disturbing ability to identify and expose the fears that recede deep within humanity. Through her art she touches upon these dark, personal fears that often refuse to be confronted. Her fiction often displays the kind of extreme intensity and outright horror of events and emotions that results in disturbing, vicious and often disgusting scenes of violence. Her characters, be they rich or poor, uneducated or cultured – "live within a psychological pressure - cooker, responding to intense personal and societal conflicts which lead almost inevitably to violence." Oates' fiction has often focused particularly on the moment when a combined psychological and cultural malaise erupts into violence; and despite the notable variety of her character portrayals there are several representative "types" that recur frequently and present distinctive facts of the turbulent American experience.

Joyce Carol Oates own life was marked by chaos, violence and dark twists of fate that beset her fictional characters and creates her obsession with what she calls "the phantasmagoria

of personality”. As a girl, she was shadowed by emotional terrors and was drawn at an early age into an intensely private world of the intellect and imagination. Her fiction, therefore, is always violent with a particular focus on obsessive states of mind. Oates’ fiction searches out and exposes the very root of violence. At the heart of violence in her world, is the absolute and utter inability to affirm oneself – without which the person is unable to live fully as a human being, to define, affirm, and assert himself, and to enter into satisfying relationships with other persons: “One of Joyce Carol Oates’ persistent concerns is to make the tragic vision real to the twentieth century.¹ states Mary Kathryn Grant.”

Violence has had a long history in America. The long shadow cast by violence characterized the century. The great wars, tribal enmity and political assassinations, though not new to human history, have permeated the century beyond all comprehensions, detracting from the progress and affecting its final kaleidoscopic form. In the introduction to his 1970 collection of primary documents, *American Violence: A Documentary History*, two - time Pulitzer Prize - winning historian Richard Hofstadter writes:

What is impressive to one who begins to learn about American violence is its extraordinary frequency, its sheer commonplaceness in our history, its persistence into very recent and contemporary times, and its rather abrupt contrast with our pretensions to singular national virtue.²

The result of social liberation in the country has led to an enormous release of pent-up energies as well as an upward movement of suppressed groups, a greater exercise of political rights, and unprecedented prosperity at all levels of the population, and a freer access to the advantages of modernization. Simultaneously with these gains there has been an explosion of negative symptoms within the community. Aggressiveness and violence by the lower classes, a revolt of the exploited, sexual promiscuity and drug abuse by youth, the lessening of parental authority before individual maturity, the decline of the sanctity of marriage, militancy among the blacks and other minority groups along with the growing instances of crime, are a few of the more disturbing signs of trouble.³ Each of these negative expressions has had a destructive or disturbing impact upon the society. Another important factor must also be taken into consideration in terms of the growing psychological tension and social stress. Climbing the social or economic ladder required an enormous individual effort. This has laid extreme stress upon the individual which is considerably even greater than the general stress of modern life. As such it has further contributed upon the stress-related symptoms of contemporary society and this has resulted in violence, suicide, alcohol, drug abuse, divorce and crime.

Although violence has always been part of the human landscape, America in particular has been undergoing a serious epidemic of adolescent violence which has deeply scarred families, schools and communities. According to Oates this aspect remains central to the symbol of eruptions in the personality itself. Lawrence Friedman in his study *The History of Crime and Punishment in America* writes:

American violence must come from somewhere deep in the American personality...it cannot be accidental; nor can it be genetic. The specific facts of American life made it what it is... crime has been perhaps a part of the price of liberty...but American violence is still a historical puzzle.⁴

Hannah Arendt states:

Violence, being instrumental by nature...it can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals. Violence does not promote causes, it promotes

neither History nor Revolution, but it can indeed serve to dramatize grievances and to bring them to public attention.⁵

She further states that:

Violence is the weapon of choice for the impotent. Those who don't have much power often attempt to control or influence others by using violence. Violence rarely creates power. On the contrary, groups or individuals that use violence often find their actions diminish what little power they do have.⁶

The fact that violence often springs from rage is commonplace, and rage can indeed be irrational and pathological, but so can every other human affect. To resort to violence in view of outrageous events or conditions is enormously tempting because of the immediacy and swiftness inherent in it. It goes against the grain of rage and violence to act with deliberate speed; but this does not make it irrational. On the contrary, in private as well as public life there are situations in which the very swiftness of a violent act may be the only appropriate remedy. As Hannah Arendt clarifies:

The point is that under certain circumstances violence, which is to act without argument or speech and without reckoning with consequences, is the only possibility of setting the scales of justice right again.⁷

John Fraser notes in *Violence in the Arts*: Some violences make for intellectual clarity and a more civilized consciousness, while others makes for confusion.⁸

If Oates' fiction leads to a sense of confusion, this is so in order to reflect the confusion that is inherent in human life and to push on toward a new consciousness. In the world of her novels, people make love, play pianos, and eat violently. Music explodes, grins shatter and grease spatters maliciously as Oates uses every rhetorical device at her command to create an explosive atmosphere. By not relying solely on the narration of violent actions but supplementing this with rhetorical violence, she succeeds in generating a highly charged fictional environment. Her narratives mirror the turbulence and disorder of this nightmarish world. By repeatedly describing even the most ordinary of human actions in terms of hostility, brutality, and truculence, Oates creates a totally violent fictive world.

Carl Jung has made an important contribution to reflection on the problem of violence, through the concept of the "shadow." He and his collaborator Erich Neumann explains the concept in the following way:

The human psyche has two primary divisions: the conscious and the unconscious. The conscious mind consists of the ego and the persona. The ego is the individual's intellectual perception of reality and of the self, the "I" that forms the continuing sense of personal identity through time. The persona is the presentation of the self to the world as a "mask." It represents the way in which the individual plays certain roles and engages in various behaviors in order to fit in and be successful in his surroundings.⁹

As Charles K. Bellinger mentions in *The Genealogy of Violence*, the unconscious mind consists of two parts, the personal unconscious holds memories relating to the individual's life history and the personal dreams. The collective unconscious is the individual's point of connection with the human race as a whole and its history. The "shadow" consists of the

negative traits, inadequacies and guilt feelings which the individual seeks to hide. In Neumann's words:

The shadow is the other side. It is the expression of our own imperfection and earthliness, the negative which is incompatible with the absolute values; it is our inferior corporeality in contradistinction to the absoluteness and eternity of a soul which "does not belong to this world." But it can also appear in the opposite capacity as "spirit," for instance when the conscious mind only recognizes the material values of this life. The shadow represents the uniqueness and transitoriness of our nature; it is our own state of limitation and subjection to the conditions of space and time.¹⁰

From Neuman's observation it is apparent that if the shadow remains unacknowledged and unintergrated into the conscious personality, then it can become a very dangerous and destabilizing force, leading the individual into various kinds of distorted behavior that results from ego-inflation. Neuman further states that:

Ego-inflation invariably implies a condition in which the ego is overwhelmed by a content which is greater, stronger and more highly charged with energy than consciousness, and which therefore causes a kind of state of possession in the conscious mind. What makes this state of possession so dangerous – irrespective of the nature of the content which lies behind it – is that it prevents the ego and the conscious mind from achieving a genuine orientation to reality.¹¹

The Jungian understanding of the roots of violence builds on the idea of the "projection of the shadow." Since the shadow is that part of the personality which contains repressed feelings of inferiority and guilt, the ego attempts to reinforce its positive self-image by projecting the shadow onto other human beings. Oates' characters do not want to honestly face their own failings and inadequacies; as such they often see oppression and other negatives in others. They often live in a fog of illusions created by their own minds. In Jung's words:

All hysterical people are compelled to torment others, because they are unwilling to hurt themselves by admitting their own inferiority. But since nobody can jump out of his skin and be rid of himself, they stand in their own way everywhere as their own evil spirit – and this is what we call a hysterical neurosis.¹²

Neumann expresses this idea in a particularly succinct way:

The shadow which is in conflict with the acknowledged values, cannot be accepted as a negative part of one's own psyche and is therefore projected – that is, it is transferred to the outside world and experienced as an outside object. It is combated, punished, and exterminated as "the alien out there" instead of being dealt with as "one's own inner problem."¹³

The concept of the projection of the shadow strikes a chord as a fruitful approach to understanding violence in Oates' works. She repeatedly uses concentrations of violence in her works in order to direct her reader's attention away from the externals of American society to crucial underlying surges in the psyche. Much of the power of Oates' fiction lies in her disturbing ability to identify and expose the fears that recede deep within humanity. Through her art she touches upon these dark, personal fears that often refuse to be confronted. Her fiction

often displays the kind of extreme intensity and outright horror of events and emotions that results in disturbing, vicious and often disgusting scenes of violence. Her characters, as Oates commented – be they rich or poor, uneducated or cultured – “live within a psychological pressure - cooker, responding to intense personal and societal conflicts which lead almost inevitably to violence.” Oates’ fiction has often focused particularly on the moment when a combined psychological and cultural malaise erupts into violence; and despite the notable variety of her character portrayals there are several representative “types” that recur frequently and present distinctive facts of the turbulent American experience.

Oates’ versatility as a fiction writer relates directly to her overwhelming fascination with the phenomenon of contemporary America: its colliding social and economic forces, its philosophical contradiction and its wayward, often violent energies. Taken as a whole, Oates’ fiction portrays America as a seething, vibrant “wonderland” in which individual lives are frequently subject to disorder, dislocation, and extreme psychological turmoil. Her protagonists range from inner-city dwellers and migrant workers to intellectuals and affluent suburbanites; but all her characters, regardless of background suffer intensely the conflicts and contradictions at the heart of American culture – a suffering that Oates conveys with both scrupulous accuracy and great compassion. Elizabeth Dalton in her article “Joyce Carol Oates: Violence in the Head” states that Oates’ “particular genius is her ability to convey psychological states with unerring fidelity and to relate the intense private experiences of her characters to the larger realities of American life”:

I think I have a vulnerability to a vibrating field of other people’s experiences,
She told an interviewer in 1972:

I lived through the ‘60s in the United States, I was aware of hatreds and
powerful feelings all around me.¹⁴

Her frequently remarked tendency to focus upon psychological terror and imbalance thus relates directly to her vision of America, what Alfred Kazin has called “her sweetly brutal sense of what American experience is really like.”¹⁵ Though she has been accused of using gratuitous or obsessive violence in her work, Oates has insisted that her violent materials accurately mirror the psychological and social convulsions of the present time. In an acerbic essay titled “Why is Your Writing So Violent?” she points out:

Serious writers, as distinct from entertainers or propagandists, take for
their natural subjects the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its
goods... The serious writer, after all, bears witness.¹⁶

Reacting upon the question as to whether her writing is unduly violent she declares that to her mind, she’s simply presenting the moral and social conditions of America. “Most of my novels and stories”, she told an interviewer:

Are explorations of the contemporary world interpreted in a realist mode,
from what might be called a tragic and humanistic viewpoint. Tragedy
always upholds the human spirit because it is an exploration of human
nature in terms of its strengths. One simply cannot know strengths unless
suffering, misfortune, and violence are explored quite frankly by the
writer.¹⁷

Although violence is a dominant mode of contemporary fiction, many contemporary writers, especially the fabulators, objectify the violent and absurd aspects of their culture. John Hawkes’ *The Lime Twig* (1961), for instance, competes with Oates’ novels in the number and

type of violent events it portrays, but it is a metaphorical violence, a projection of psychic images rather than of reality. Although these writers may not be conscious that they are subduing the beast of contemporary life by taking it out of real settings – indeed it is distinctly not the point for them – it is nevertheless an effect of their work. Oates, however, is usually meticulous in drawing her realistic settings so that when a fabulous event invades ordinary circumstances, it is jarring and disturbing because it is made part of the ordinary flow of time; it is not isolated by the imagination from life. It is less an aesthetic image projected by the imagination than it is an imitation, albeit melodramatic, of life.¹⁸ Oates' fiction does alarm and repels, but what Oates does describe is an oppressive and insistent rhythm of American life. In answer to a question about the violence in her fiction, she said: These things do not have to be contrived. This is America.¹⁹

Her works projects an America of race riots, migrant labor camps, suburban greed, motorcycle and race car jocks, mail-order rifles, volatile and hyperbolic adolescence, political assassination, family violence, self-proclaimed prophets preaching death and drugs – the America screaming from the headlines of the daily presses. Oates often sets this “headline” picture of American life against the larger canvas of American history. Her novels, which often begins in the nineteen thirties, denote a sense of the movement of American history. Behind the gripping close-up of her characters' lives move the Great Depression, World War II, the Civil Rights Movements and the Vietnam War.

On analyzing the concept of violence, James Gilligan writes:

Violence can be analyzed as a destruction of our physical and bodily existence, as well as of its symbolic representations in language and other institutions. Violence, however, can also be analyzed at a more fundamental level. Phenomenologically viewed, it is not only destructive of pre-given sense, but also affects our being – in – the - world, i.e., our basic capacities for making sense.²⁰

Oates' characters are unique in contemporary American fiction in the frequency and severity of their destructive behavior. Oates has created, and continues prolifically to create a paranoiac vision of America in which something has gone “terribly wrong.” Unlike writers in the great humanistic European and American traditions, Oates seems to seldom believe in human capacities for learning and for emotional growth and awareness as well as in the ego's connection to anything beyond its temporary sensory gratifications. Despite Oates' considerable national reputation as a writer, teacher and essayist, she has so far been consistently successful aesthetically in her representation of retrenched contemporary life on native grounds. Her insistence that society provides boundaries for existence and knowledge that cannot be crossed, clearly distinguishes her fiction from much classic and contemporary American fiction. According to Poirier:

What distinguishes our fictional heroes is that there is nothing within the real world, or in the systems which dominate it, that can possibly satisfy their aspirations.²¹

They create “a world elsewhere,” free from the mire of fact, where the individual transcends the temporal and cultural limits of his existence. The need for transcendence and the dissatisfaction with the American experience as a sustaining and meaningful base for life, has often been traced to the peculiarities of America's historical and political circumstances. As Tocqueville noted in Democracy in America, in a democracy:

Each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object: namely himself. If he ever looks higher, he perceives only the immense form of a society at large, or the still more imposing aspect of mankind...What lies between is a void.²²

American fiction seems to acknowledge the truth of Tocqueville's observation. For the most part, American classic and contemporary writers have concentrated on the romance, with excursions into realism and naturalism, (which the naturalist Frank Norris argued in "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" is also romance.²³) Much of the contemporary romance fiction is perhaps less a manifestation of twentieth-century experimentation than a symptom of America's history and political system. American writers seem to feel that there are no institutions which adequately mediate between the individual and the universe at large, the individual feels himself "dangling" between his puny life and the immensity of creation. The recourse has been to create "a world elsewhere." This tendency on the part of American fiction to ignore or subdue with fabulations the American experience has been encouraged by the facts of twentieth-century life, namely, the holocaust; nuclear weapons; increased mobility; the faded power of family life, religion, ideology; and the "orgiastic" technological society.²⁴ However, Oates suggests that if these are the terms of existence, then the escape into the "fabulous," into the isolation of personal fantasies and fears, is only an intensification of these terms and not a true liberation from them.²⁵ In a critical essay on Troilus and Cressida, Oates reveals her concern with the limits that are imposed by life in the world:

Man is trapped within a temporal, physical world, and his rhetoric, his poetry, even his genius cannot free him. What is so modern about the play is its existential insistence upon the complete inability to transcend his fate.

Later in the same essay she states:

There is a straining upward, an attempt on the part of the characters to truly transcend their predicaments. The predicaments, however, cannot be transcended because man is locked in the historical and the immediate.²⁶

Oates' life seems to bear a paradoxical relationship to her writing. She pursued a quiet, disciplined daily routine, yet wrote about people who were floundering in personal chaos and social order. In a 1989 letter, Oates related her own sense of invisibility to her gender:

The social self, the person people encounter, is almost irrelevant. I think this must be particularly true for women writers, though not necessarily for the traditional reasons – the masking of the writerly self by, say, Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, Emily Dickinson, in the service of maintaining an acceptable feminine image in others' eyes.²⁷

As a young writer, Oates had refused to discuss her background with journalists while claiming that the material was too personal. Oates' immigrant heritage, the hardscrabble early lives of her parents during the Depression, and her own childhood in the upstate New York countryside seemed to her, as a part of a world that was best left "back there." It was a rich fund of memories and material for her writing, but related only in a private, oblique way to the intellectually oriented young writer that she had become. However, Oates had become fascinated by her grandparents' experiences, which were marked by the same dark turnings of fate that regularly befall the characters in Oates' fiction. Her maternal grandparents, she learned, had been forced to give her mother, Carolina up for adoption because the family had grown too

large. Her paternal grandmother, to whom Oates was extremely close as a child, had been abandoned by her husband when Oates' father, Frederic was only a toddler. There were other surprising details: Oates' paternal great-grandfather was a German Jew who had changed his name from "Morgenstern" to "Morningstar" in the 1980s. Years later, in a fit of jealous rage, he beat his wife severely with a hammer and then shot himself. Oates' maternal grandfather, Stephen Bush, also met a violent end: he was murdered in a tavern brawl. Although Fred and Carolina Oates provided a safe and nurturing home environment for their children, Oates' early years had held their own terrors, including an instance of "semi-molestation" and constant bullying that prompted her, years later, to describe her childhood as "a day scrambled for existence."²⁸ In 1995, she observes:

How ironic, as a writer I've been constantly queried why do you write about violent acts? What do you know of violence? And my replies are polite, thoughtful, abstract and even idealistic. I might say that my entire life, indeed the lives of both my parents, have been shaped by 'violent acts.'²⁹

It was perhaps inevitable that a novelist obsessively concerned with the mysteries of personality and identity should finally long to piece together what could be recovered of her past, with its eerily blended elements of terror and beauty. For many of Oates' earliest impressions were imbued with a magical sense of wonder that inspired an intense nostalgia: "What romance, in that world," she wrote in a letter to Carolina. "because you inhabited it, you and Daddy, it's transformed."³⁰ To focus exclusively on the unsavory and violent details of her background, she observed, would be no less misleading than to deny them. Oates often felt willingly:

Pulled back into that world as into the most seductive and most nourishing of dreams. I'm filled with a sense of wonder, and awe, and fear, regret for all that has passed, and for what must be surrendered, what we can imagine as life but cannot ever explain.³¹

To Oates, her family background continued to represent a tantalizing mystery:

Like a door opening to a shadowy passageway, but only just opening a few inches, never to be budged any further.³²

Oates has often said that a primary motive behind her writing is her yearning to memorialize the past, especially the lives of her mother and father. The rural world of her mother's childhood and the youthful aspirations of both her parents inspired in their daughter a romantic longing to cast the turbulent flux of a lost era into the enduring shapeliness of art. In *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) and in other early novels such as *Them* (1969) and *Wonderland* (1971), Oates reached back to the 1930s as the dramatic focus of her narratives she evoked the world of the Depression and its aftermath as a landscape that was marked by the passionate energies and sharp deprivations out of which her young protagonists tried to forge their own identities and control their own fates. In contrast to the heroines of her later work, Oates cast young males in these novels as her autobiographical counterparts, or soul mates. Out of her own early sense of self she created sensitive, highly intelligent idealists who experience a variety of fates: suffering defeat by the materialistic forces of mid-century American culture, like Swan Revere in *A Garden of Earthly Delights* who pursues the American dream through love and violence and Jules Wendall in *Them*; or forging a self through the sheer force of will, like *Wonderland's* Jesse Vogel, a Depression-era orphan who becomes a celebrated neurosurgeon. At the heart of these early protagonists' experiences, however, is their author's insistent homage to

the bedrock of natural and social reality from which they arose. In an early interview, Oates remarked that behind all her fiction lay an “imperishable sense of reality” derived primarily from the natural settings and economically straitened circumstances of her family background – a reality she has transcribed faithfully and sometimes obsessively in her fiction. “The real clue to me,” she added, “is that I’m like certain people who are not really understood – Jung and Heidegger are good examples – people of peasant stock, from the country, who then come into a world of literature or philosophy. Part of us is very intellectual, wanting to read all the books in the library – or even wanting to write all the books in the library. Then there’s the other side of us, which is sheer silence, inarticulate – the silence of nature, of the sky, of pure being.”³³

Brian P. Hayes comments:

Miss Oates tells what happens to her characters and what their experiences – usually terrible- do to them but she rarely explains what they are thinking about their plights...A number of the major themes of literature are recognizable in Miss Oates’ works. She has Tolstoy’s sense of history as it overwhelms the individual, and she reveals a classical affinity for fatalism and lost innocence... Miss Oates’ ties are to the twentieth-century school of American naturalism, particularly Theodore Dreiser. Although she is less concerned with sociology than he was, Miss Oates’ stories unfold in the same harsh settings, and her characters fight to survive with the same befuddled amorality as those of An American Tragedy.³⁴

Through Oates identification with her highly intelligent young heroes in the early novels, she placed them in a family context that included such earthly characters such as Clara, Swan’s mother in A Garden of Earthly Delights, and Loretta, Jules’s mother in them. When them was published Oates told an interviewer:

I have a great admiration for those females who I know from my own life, my background, my family – very strong female figures who do not have much imagination in an intellectual sense, but they’re very capable of dealing with life.³⁵

A Garden of Earthly Delights (1967) is set in rural Eden County and chronicles the life of the daughter of a migrant worker who marries a wealthy farmer in order to provide for her illegitimate son. The woman’s idyllic existence is destroyed, however, when the boy murders his stepfather and kills himself. In Expensive People (1967), the second work in the series, images of destitution, strain, hatred as well as ordinary incidents are depicted dramatically and violent scenes constantly heightened. “I was a child murderer” is the opening sentence of the novel. Oates also exposes the superficial world of suburbanites whose preoccupation with material comforts reveals their spiritual poverty. The final volume in the trilogy, them (1969), opens with the scene of a concentration of pointless, uneasy malice and murder. The novel denotes elements of blood soaking in a pillow, the odor of blood and bodies, crazed fear, rape, and through it all, the relentless determinism of poverty. The story depicts the violence and degradation that is endured by three generations of an urban Detroit family. Critics acknowledge that Oates’ experiences as a teacher in Detroit during the early 1960’s contributed to her accurate rendering of the city and its social problems. She has described A Garden of Earthly Delights, Expensive People, and them as a consciously wrought “trilogy”, intended to examine the representative facts of American life: the rural, suburban, and inner – city environments respectively, each containing its own forms of moral and psychological decay.³⁶ These stories all have in common,

both a riveting psychological intensity and an authoritative, all – inclusive vision of “what American experience is really like” for people who suffer various kinds of emotional turmoil and who become emblematic of America as a whole.³⁷ The Falls (2004), is a book which was acclaimed by *Washington Post* as “One of the best books of the year.” It is another exploration of violence where one woman’s honeymoon is salvaged by her husband’s suicide. The widow is remarried to a wealthy and handsome lawyer but her love shifts to something darker as she becomes obsessed with the idea of losing her second husband, and when her children come along, her love for them is so fierce and so charged that it remains absolutely terrifying. In Black Girl/White Girl (2006), Genna the main protagonist, has been haunted for fifteen years by the brutal death of her enigmatic college roommate – a merit scholarship student named Minette Swift, (the title’s black girl) – Genna embarks on what she calls a “test without a title in the service of justice”, a personal “inquiry” in which she attempts to reconstruct the events of the fateful year when she and Minette were freshmen. The novels showcase her fascination with violence as well as her almost vampiric ability to tap into the subconscious of her troubled characters and her taste for appropriating real – life tragedy. In her work The Edge of Impossibility (1972), she revealed:

Violence is always an affirmation – to understand it, that is, and not be repelled by it. For violence is an affirmation only when it is perceived as a last remedy against nihilism, a desperate grace.

Oates’s criticism makes clear that this is how she conceives of violence and its role in art.

In a much - quoted remark, Philip Roth has said that “the American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to describe, and then to make credible, much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents.”³⁸ Yet Joyce Carol Oates has met this challenge with increasingly bold and resourceful experiments in fiction. A sense of place is important to most novelists, but in Oates’ work the setting is profoundly linked to each major character’s sense of self. Her fiction is often a means of recovering the worlds which she has lost, especially in terms of the rural setting of her childhood and the city of Lockport. As an adult, she would devote many passages in her journal to recording in precise detail the rooms, houses, neighborhoods, and natural landscapes in which crucial events of her life had transpired.³⁹ In 1985, after a five-day visit with her parents, Oates wrote in one entry that she felt “caught in that odd hypnotic trance of (what can I call it? The spell – surely inexplicable to anyone else – of Lockport, New York) the past not quiet remembered.”⁴⁰ During the second night of her visit home, she wrote:

I drove by myself around the city. At dusk. Very slowly. Those streets: Grand St., Transit St.,...Hawley St. school where, 60 years ago, my father was a student...Lost emotions. Lost feeling. That elusive lost self. Three times I drove along Grand St., past the house my grandmother had rented...Yet to think of approaching it as it was in, say, 1953, or earlier, is to feel a clutch of emotion almost too powerful to contain. And to ascend those stairs! And to enter that small living room! The kitchen! My grandmother’s bedroom and sewing room!⁴¹

Characteristically, Oates made pragmatic use of this burst of nostalgia in her novel You Must Remember This (1987) , published two years later. Thanking John Updike for his review of the novel in *The New Yorker*, Oates wrote that she was especially pleased that Updike had quoted a passage featuring a footbridge:

The very image that was the first thing I had written, in a sort of white heat, imagining the novel as a recasting of my early adolescence spent in Lockport...My grandmother with whom I was extremely close lived on a street very like the Stevicks' in a house very like theirs." The footbridge, she recalled, was "high above the Erie canal and precariously close, as it seemed to me, to a railroad bridge."⁴²

This aspect was so haunting to the young Oates that she often dreamed about it and the Lockport footbridge subsequently made numerous appearances in her fiction.

Apart from her own experiences, Oates' observations of her friends' marriages also contributed to her fiction about romantic love, particularly where the identity of the female character was concerned. One of her friends, Patty Brunett remembered that Oates was:

Very very curious about my life and what I was doing, and how I felt about men, and the women's movement.⁴³

In 1969, Patty painted Oates' portrait and remembered that as Oates sat there, perfectly, motionless, she remembered that:

Women should be utterly independent in their marriage, and lead their own lives, and not be the pawn of husbands.⁴⁴

An academic couple that Oates befriended in the late 1960s, John and Ruth Reed also recalled Oates' strong opinions about women's independence and the importance of a healthy marriage.

Oates increasingly hectic life had begun to take a considerable physical toll. After a trip to New York that she made in the late 1969, she denoted that she was extremely busy and worried and that despite attending dinner parties and eating in New York restaurants, she was unable to gain any weight. For Oates, periods of stress had begun causing a near-total loss of appetite. In her letters, Oates sometimes expressed revulsion toward food and parties generally, describing an event at the Detroit Golf Club where she had witnessed heaping displays of food that she found disgusting.⁴⁵ She mentions:

Such displays are so ostentatious, they could not be parodied.⁴⁶

Negative images of food recur with a peculiar frequency and intensity throughout her work. Her female protagonists in every decade of her career – Karen Herz in *With Shuddering Fall* (1964), Elena Howe in *Do With Me What You Will* (1971), Marya Knauer in *Marya: A Life* (1986), and Marianne Mulvaney in *We Were the Mulvaney's* (1996) – disdain the process of eating and nurture. In *them*, a girlfriend of Jules remarks that "I hate food. It's disgusting, when you consider it. And the need for food, having bodies and being reduced to eating food – did you ever think about that?"⁴⁷

This drive towards anorexia is often coupled with a portrayal of female sexual experience in wholly negative and destructive terms. Especially considering the huge body of Oates' work, it is striking that the vast majority of her women experience sex as degrading and horrific. Rarely do lovers in Oates' fiction experience genuine tenderness and communion in the sexual act. Karen Herz, Clara Walpole, Maureen Wendall, Marya Knauer, Enid Stevick, Marianne Mulvaney, and Ingrid Boone⁴⁸ are only a few examples of the dozens of Oates' heroines who suffer sexual molestation, incest, or rape while permanently altering their sense of self and their ability to form fulfilling sexual relationships. Although Oates herself sometimes dismissed her personal issues with food, claiming that she simply preferred working to eating, it seems clear that the frequent and occasionally intense anorexic impulses that mark her life and are often dramatized in her fiction have deep psychological roots. Both medical and feminist authorities on

anorexia have defined a number of causative factors, many of which correspond to the facts of Oates' early life and her psychological makeup. According to one expert, an experience of sexual abuse such as that which Oates suffered as a young girl often leads to the development of eating disorder. For a girl who has felt victimized, fasting "begins to yield a particularly powerful sense of control...it provides a sense of mastery."⁴⁹

Oates says that her artistic mission was to dramatize the painful conflicts of her era; "There's no need to write about happy people, happy problems; there's only the moral need to instruct readers," she says, "concerning the direction to take, in order to achieve happiness (or whatever: maybe they don't want happiness, only confusion)." In a brief essay published in *The American Scholar*, she noted that many American writers were dreamily lost in a self-obsessed view of art that was "passive and deathly"; only Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow, she said, had "struggles quiet nobly to define a self in the center of chaos." She added that her brief year in England (1971-1972) had allowed her "to think dispassionately about what is happening back home, about the kind of writing that is being turned out and applauded, and about my own career up to this point. I can see in amazement that I have only haphazardly and instinctively, never consciously, broken through that dreaminess myself, and that the whole range of my writing so far has dealt only with one phase of the personality and its possibilities."⁵⁰

Harold Bloom states:

What I myself find most moving in Oates is her immense empathy with the insulted and injured her deep identification with the American lower classes. She is not a political novelist, not a social revolutionary in any merely overt way, and yet she is our true proletarian novelist.⁵¹

Towards 1980s, Oates shift away from the stark sometimes violent contemporary realism of her work into the lush, romantic playfulness of Gothic conventions. However, it hardly signaled any relaxation into an easier, more "feminine" mode of writing. And in 1985, she excitedly returned to the realistic mode which represented a major artistic turning point, which is reflected in most of her fiction of the late 1980s and beyond. But the transition encompassed more than a simple reversion to her favored mode of psychological realism. Her Detroit fiction of the late 1960s and 1970s – *them* (1969), *Wonderland* (1971), *Do With Me What You Will* (1973) and *The Assassins: A Book of Hours* (1975) had focused on the social ills of contemporary America in the city Oates considered a microcosm of the nation as whole, and her Gothic quintet of the early 1980s – *Bellefleur* (1980), *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982) and *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1984) had experimented with the aesthetic modes and American myths of the nineteenth century. In sharp contrast to these phases of her career, her work now became more directly autobiographical while returning again and again to the upstate New York world of her childhood. This impulse would persist into the late 1990s. With a few exceptions, her subsequent novels were set in mythologized versions of the countryside that she had known as a child and of the cities- especially Lockport and Buffalo – that had dominated her adolescent experience. *Marya: A Life* (1986), *You Must Remember This* (1987), *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* (1990), *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993), and *Man Crazy* (1997) all feature female protagonists whose temperaments and ways of responding to a bewildering, often hostile environment mirrors Oates' own. Marya Knauer, Enid Stevick, Iris Courtney, Maddy Wirtz, and Ingrid Boone are highly intelligent, articulate girls who survive and bear witness to painful and even brutal early experiences. Like Oates, they often find salvation in literary or academic achievement, seeing language as the means of ordering and, to some extent,

transcending the past. Marya becomes a scholar, Iris marries into an academic family, Maddy records the achievements of the Foxfire gang, and only after Ingrid attends college does she cope with her horrific victimization and achieve a significant distance, both chronological and intellectual, from her nightmarish early life.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Oates secure position as a “woman of letters” combined with the increased self-knowledge of middle age has continued to enable a more intensely confessional impulse in her work. Intellectual and emotional distance from her own early trauma have given her the freedom to dramatize them more openly in her fiction and even to discuss them in interviews (with a frankness that would have been unthinkable to Oates in her twenties or thirties). It also seems likely that Oates’ increasingly fragmented life during the 1980s and 1990s – stemming from her heightened visibility as a public figure and so different from her years of relative isolation has intensified her focus upon the distant past as a kind of emotional anchor, the essential core of her personal identity. In Wonderland, the brief portrait of Oates as a small child with her parents had been a mere cameo and it was a rare autobiographical indulgence. We Were the Mulvaneys and other novels of the past decade are filled with countless and specific details from Oates’ personal experience. The very phrasing of her titles – “you must remember this,” “what I lived for,” “we were the mulvaney” – suggests this backward-looking focus, as does the narrative technique in Foxfire and Man Crazy, both of which are deliberately constructed as “confessions.” Whereas them and other early novels were “Balzacian,” as Oates herself pointed out.⁵² In their ambition as social chronicles, her most recent work namely, Blonde (2000), Middle Age: A Romance (2001) and Black Girl/ White Girl (2006), to name a few are more “Oatesian” in the relentless focus upon language as a means of revisiting and memorializing the past.

In retrospect, it is possible to describe several distinct phases in her career and to suggest her significance within twentieth-century American literary culture. Her earliest work clearly arose from personal feelings of alienation: the novels and stories dealing with Eden County dramatized forcefully the rural world near Millersport, Lockport, and Buffalo, which Oates escaped (physically, if not emotionally) through her academic and literary achievements. The next major phase, spanning the years 1968 to 1972 was shaped largely by her Detroit experience, which encouraged her development from a somewhat derivatives. Many critics and anthologists still consider the major works of this period – the novel them (1969) and Wonderland (1971), to be the novel by Joyce Carol Oates that is most likely to endure. Although she has not produced another novel with the hypnotic power of them or the sustained intensity of Wonderland, the remainder of the 1970s saw her expanding her Balzacian exploration of American culture into the arenas of the law, politics, religion, and academic life.

The next major phase of Oates’ career can be considered only a partial success. Residing comfortably in Princeton since 1978, Oates has lacked any significant conflict with her own environment, a situation that permitted the playful experimentation and, the self-indulgent excess of postmodernist Gothic quintet novels that began with Bellefleur (1980). Whereas Bellefleur represented a bold reinvention of literary reinvention of literary Gothicism, the succeeding volumes with their unsympathetic, long-winded narrators tempted Oates into writing books which, with their richness of allusion and artifice, were relished by academic specialists but not by the more general readership that for years had looked to Oates for unflinching, fully engaged portrayals of the contemporary American reality.⁵³ Throughout her life, Oates has made comments that are notable for expressing an uncertain sense of her physical self while leading

her to repeatedly use the metaphor of her own “invisibility.” Many of Oates’ self-descriptions suggest a willfully abstracted woman who, like a grown-up version of her childhood alter-ego, Lewis Carroll’s Alice, has all but vanished into the wonderland of her imagination.⁵⁴ She told one interviewer, “there’s this kind of empty blur that must be where I exist” she told another that she saw herself as a “mere vapor of consciousness.” She added, “I don’t really identify with my physical self that much.”

The dramatic trajectory of Oates’ career, especially her amazing rise from an economically straitened childhood to her current position as one of the world’s most eminent authors, suggests a literary version of the mythic pursuit and achievement of the American dream. Yet for all her success and fame, Oates’ daily routine of teaching and writing has changed very little, and her commitment to literature as a transcendent human activity remains steadfast. Not surprisingly, a quotation from a prolific American writer, Henry James, is affixed to the bulletin board over her desk, and perhaps best expresses her own ultimate view of her life and writing:

We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.⁵⁵

Oates fiction can be categorized into genres which are romantic, historical, gothic, crime and including family chronicles and the suspense novel. She shows a remarkable talent for parody and allows these various forms to meld into each other while following the rules of genre and reinventing its form simultaneously. The themes she follows in exploring her ideologies are involved in unpacking American images as a way of understanding the politics and complex psychological impact behind them. The images that Oates always labors to unpack are the starting points that lead the reader through her interpretations into an understanding of history as a labyrinth of competing ideologies and ceaselessly transforming conclusions. These ideologies are always based in significant American experiences that usually end with violent consequences and have been simplified in history’s record of them. The true meanings behind these experiences are unknown and the misconceptions that arise from their misunderstanding are destructive. Hence, there exists a continuing theme of the mystery and crime, whose solution never fits very comfortably in the character or reader’s mind. Sometimes these ‘mysteries’ are very abstract and are connected to ideological systems which cannot be simply summarized, and sometimes they are frighteningly serious. These apply especially to her numerous stories of rape and other violence, and inherently against women and children. The answers to the cause of the violent experiences can be simply summed up, but the layers of ideological arguments that they are packed with, remain staunchly irresolvable.

Oates’ usual method for portraying ideological framework is to write of dramatic events that are inherently violent in her stories. This is sometimes done with hindsight in which the character’s deliberation is overshadowed by the interpretations which the characters place upon them. Within these interpretations the characters reveal their primary ideological drives and the positive and negative aspects of them. At times when an event is portrayed in the present, it is built around a jumble of conflicting emotions that make it unintelligible. The conception that the repercussions of crime are not always physically evident is an important idea to be considered in Oates’ other more ‘realistic’ fiction where the crimes referred to are at times against people who are unscathed upon the surface, but display a considerable amount of mental and spiritual damage in the narrative. Though this crime is presented in the present time, its roots lie in previous crimes that are unmentionable because of the structure of the community’s ideological

basis and the suppression that can arise out of the tightly knit domesticity of the family suppression that can arise out of the tightly knit domesticity of the family. The same sense of ‘crime’ that is passively accepted or overlooked because of its domestic condition is broadened in Oates’ family saga *Bellefleur*. Here, family’s gossip, stories and jokes initiate the transformation into a non-human and fantastic sense of reality. The lives of the family members that are interpreted by each other are changed through the imagination of the individual narrating it:

For Bellefleurs, despite their affection for Hepatica, could not resist jests of a course nature; and such jests as the men readily admitted required a certain distortion of human reality.⁵⁶

The distortion tries to imaginatively recreate situations with an edge drawn by personal motives illuminating the conflicting ideological bases by which the various members of the family over multiple generations live. Each of the family members have their own way of interpreting the ‘American dream’ and in the execution of these interpretations they find conflicts between the other members of the family. Creighton summarizes the two primary motives of the American dream that Oates represents:

At the heart of the American dream is the quest for both material and spiritual fulfillment—two goals that are not always complementary. Bellefleurs epitomize and dramatize the dualities at the heart of the American dream and the American character.⁵⁷

By inhabiting these ideological goals of the ‘American dream’ the family members dramatically represent the causes by which they are never satisfactorily fulfilled. These ideological elements of the ‘American dream’ are transposed into gothic renderings of events between the characters. The monstrous specters that work their way into the *Bellefleur*’s reality are the psychologically real elements of character’s conflicts.

The novels which Oates writes are an attempt to draw these American experiences from a different perspective in order to consider the competing ideologies that lie behind them. Through her artistic creations, readers are meant to infer that these events must be reimagined in order to be understood from a personal perspective. Oates’ symbolic representation of American ideology extends into the lengthy detailed descriptions she creates in her stories. These details of the character’s lives and surroundings reflect the way they wish to physically create themselves. They represent the things by which the characters chose to build their own conception of reality. G F Waller considers the significance of the detail:

Oates’s America is built up as a reverberating symbolic structure from such material commonplaces as highways, automobiles, supermarkets, shopping malls, money, cleanliness, success, marriage, motherhood, all heightened into the fabric of gothic parable. Our experience is constantly revealed as characterized by tragic gaps between word and act, ideal and reality not in the trivial everyday sense but almost as a metaphysical principle, felt all the more strongly just because we are seekers of meaning, not merely of contentment.⁵⁸

These details of existence with which the characters have surrounded themselves are choices that have been made in order to characterize their image of themselves. They are symbolic of aspects in their drive toward an ideal conception of the self. The physical reality which they build around themselves also invokes the ideological bases of past lives while transmuting them to the characters and their present lives. Oates identifies the determination to create a personal sense of

the self as a distinctly American one, the country having been founded upon such ideas of independent conception. Her characters frequently dramatize this stubborn will for self creation as the character of Ardis in Do With Me What You Will (1973):

We're our own ideas, we make ourselves up; some women let men make them up, invent them, fall in love with them, they're helpless to invent themselves ... but not me, I'm nobody's idea but my own. I know who I am.⁵⁹

Ardis' determination to be self-created leads her (as the novel progresses) to change her name several times. She also sits down at one point to trace the names her mother has gone through by trying to track down who she actually is. Oates represents through these characters the struggle they feel necessary to create themselves apart from any foreign, especially male, conceptions of who they are. As Waller states:

For most contemporary fictionalists, Americans remain stubbornly caught up in dreams of identity and place; for Oates, ours remains a generation which still seeks 'the absolute dream', and as with the Puritans forsaking their history to journey to a wilderness, our dream must survive within an environment so aggressively materialistic that to assert the primacy of the unquantifiable seems necessary to end in the Manicheism which has constantly characterized American experience.⁶⁰

The personal past that the characters work so hard to defeat is connected to a larger past that they feel must be disowned because it does not constitute the original images they carry of themselves. However, the material reality they build themselves into is based upon the ideologies of this past from which they wish to be released. Violence is a condition of society. It is also composed of individual acts and it is these that Oates records in her work. Yet, the fact that violence will remain a part of a larger social network is something that is referred to throughout Oates' reimagination of these violent events. As Creighton observes in connection with Oates' fiction:

We strike out in order that we may become. In a society where the instincts are so much repressed, violence may become a gesture of liberation, of purging, or self-discovery. Indeed, violence seems to be at the heart of the dream of America, as we cultivate the palpable risk, the danger of our deepest desires.⁶¹

Understanding the violent and frequently ironic terms of the American experience, Oates has employed a notable variety of aesthetic approaches in her attempt to convey such an immense, kaleidoscopic and frequently grotesque reality. Driving the dynamo of her America is the fact of violence. The city and its automobiles and freeways, its material and psychic energies, are manifestations of the assertiveness and violence of America. Oates has asked herself:

Am I personally haunted by the fear of violence, the need of violence, or do I reflect everyone else's feelings about it? I sensed it around me, both the fear and the desire, and perhaps I simply have appropriated it from other people?⁶²

"But the violence that always threatens to erupt through the surface of Oates' America exists only in part as an acknowledgement of the omnipresence of the struggle, crime, and chaos in our society," writes G.F. Waller. She repeatedly uses concentrations of violence in her fiction to direct the readers' attention away from the externals of American society in order to crucial underlying surges in the psyche. Oates devises the rhetoric of violence in order to sensitise the reader towards the highly volatile, nightmarish undercurrents in the psyche, thereby making the reader aware of imminent dislocation or disaster in lives.

The violence which is omnipresent in Oates' fiction, is more a reflection of the general atmosphere that she feels in society than any cry of victimization. The question of violence in Oates writing is well condensed in Elaine Showalter's 'Portrait' of Oates:

In the seventies, Oates' work was often criticized for its violent themes and images, for scenes of riots, beatings, and murders; and reviewers wondered whether some trauma of her own was responsible for her dark vision. Oates responded in a 1981 essay for the *New York Times Book Review*, called 'Why Is Your Writing So Violent?' The question, she wrote, was 'always insulting...always ignorant...always sexist,' a question that would never be asked of a serious male artist.⁶³

The work of Joyce Carol Oates uses ideological frameworks like the 'American dream' to artistically unravel the definitions by which it has been constructed and the consequences of attempts to actualize it. The personal interactions between the characters in her stories are the meeting points of different interpretations of ideologies. The reader can interpret from this the multifarious influences that filter into ideological constructions. Oates' prodigious ability to realize these interactions through various fictional modes of writing produces a range of perspectives to the central ideologies that she seeks to unpack. The awareness of mode that this produces is distinctly postmodernist in its awareness of the limitations in its construction. Oates seeks through her works, to awaken contemporary society to its own destruction and to deepen the consciousness of her readers to the tragic dimensions of life. Positing the hopeful idea that the violent conflicts in American culture represent, not an "apocalyptic close" but a "transformation of being", Oates suggests that we are experiencing "a simple evolution into a higher humanism, perhaps a kind of intelligent pantheism, in which all substance in the universe (including the substance fortunate enough to perceive it) is there by equal right."⁶⁴

Violence therefore must be faced as an omnipresent in the society. This observation is thrust not just as an obvious commonplace but as an urgent insight that the most revered rituals, games and relationships are necessarily interpenetrated by violence. Rather than trying to maintain standards of civilization in the face of violence, Oates' characters are forced to reaffirm or reassess their values as they encounter violence at the heart of all their most intimate and valuable experiences. In the bewildering profusion and violence of modern times, in the lives of her students and in her own fiction, she finds her subject.

Alfred Kazin has written that Oates, more than most women writers in America, seems:

Entirely open to social turmoil, to the frighteningly undirected and misapplied force of the American powerhouse.⁶⁵

Critics hold diverse opinions about Oates' work, particularly about her repeated use of graphic violence. Eva Manske has summarised the general view:

Some of her novels and stories are rather shrill in depicting the human situation, remain melodramatic renderings of everyday life, highly charged with unrelenting scenes of shocking, random violence, or madness and emotional distress that Oates chronicles as dominant elements of experience in the lives of her characters.⁶⁶

To this charge Oates responded:

When people say there is too much violence in my books, what they are saying is there is too much reality in life.⁶⁷

Oates is obsessed not merely by the social profusion of America. Her fiction evokes the city (of America) as a revelation of psychological besides social realism. The sense of victimization, the rootless bewilderment and paucity of relationships are all rooted in the psyche and they emerge in it involuntary, movements or cryptic, frustrated ejaculations of command or insult. In Kierkegaard's theory of violence:

Violence arises out of human resistance to the possibility of psychological change and growth into maturity.⁶⁸

In the same manner, for Oates, this resistance to change becomes the cause of violence which torments her characters. Her work exude a sense of a writer extraordinarily involved in, and open to the variety of American lives and determined not just to record or reflect upon but to embrace the polyphony of her times.

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